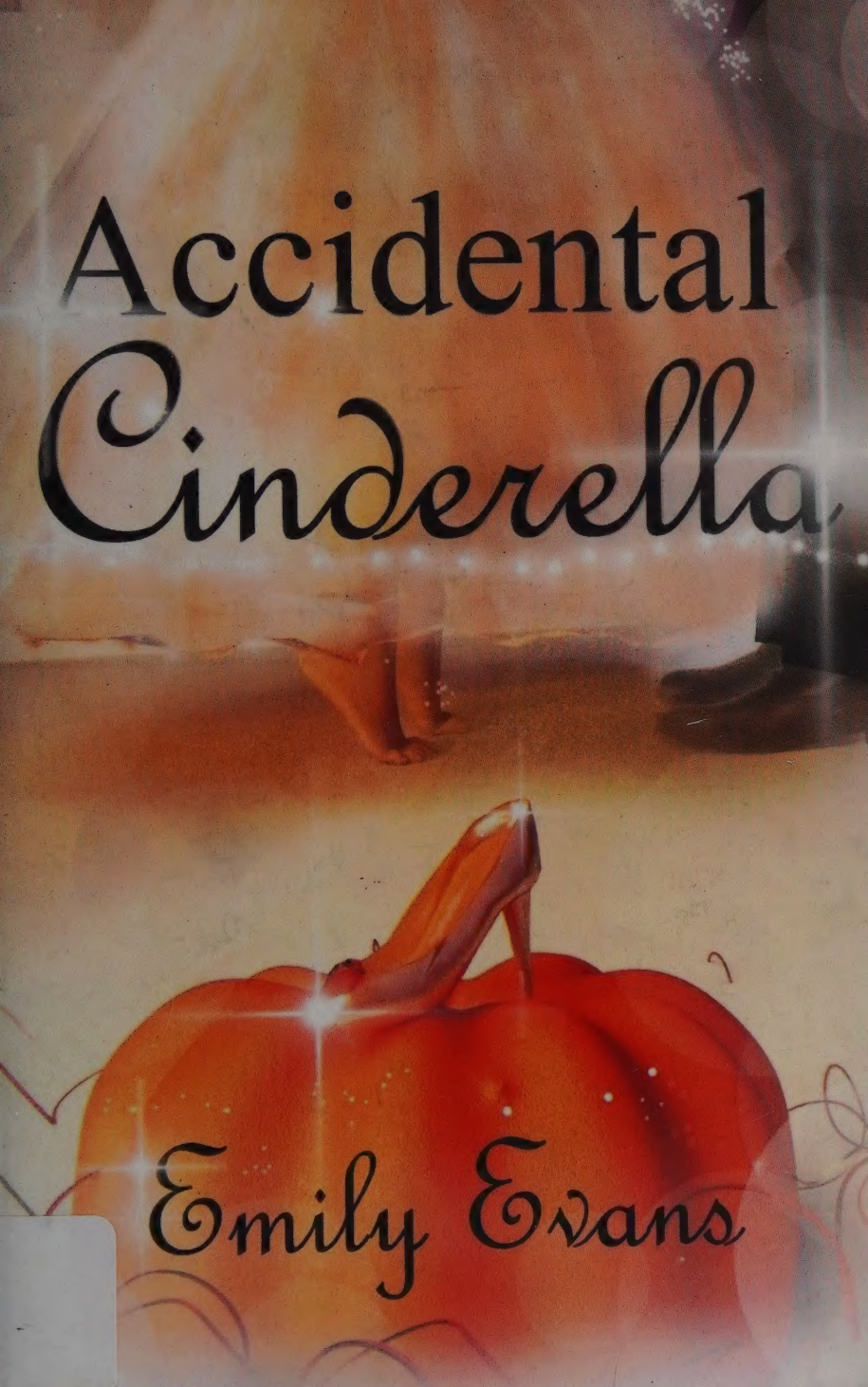
Accidental Cinderella



Emily Evans

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For Uncle Rudy, you are missed.

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Chapter 1

Okay, I'm not supposed to be down here. But come on, the girls at the dorm were going on and on about the Pear Ball. Who was invited, who wasn't, who was wearing what... admittedly that part had been interesting. But there was only so much Ella wanted to hear about people she didn't know. She was the new girl. The new girl without an invite to the Pear Ball. So she'd snuck down to the school museum to hang out. Alone.

Ella leaned into the painted brick fireplace. She looked past the furniture covered in white drop cloths and out the grimy window where she'd traced her name *Ella Marie Aschen,* and *Why am I here?* What was she doing at the most elite school in Massachusetts? She had no money. She had average grades. She didn't play a sport. She wasn't even from Massachusetts. How had she received the invite? It was as much a mystery as what lay under the tarps.

Now, what was happening outside was not a mystery.

She peered harder through the glass.

Oh my...

The rowing crew, the rowers—oh, whatever they were called—a group of shirtless guys marched up from the lake toward the school and she had a world-class view. Bare shoulders kissed by the late August sun, arms toned by hours of rowing, abs toned by whatever it was that toned abs.

A few girls walked double-time to keep up with the guys. The girls wore the Erskine Prep school uniforms like her: pale blue and black tartan skirts topped with white shirts and blue cardigans. She recognized a few from her earlier introductions at the dorm, but frankly the girls didn't hold her attention. The hot guys did.

Most of them were just guys like at her old school. They jostled, heckled, and challenged each other to race. One stood out as a leader. It was difficult to tell why, exactly. He had good looks, but so did the others. He was tall and had an athletic stride, but so did the others. The guys drew closer, so much closer they'd be able to see her gawking at them like they were special. They were, but they didn't need to know that. Adrenaline backed her away from exposure.

Footsteps sounded outside the door. Heavy. Was that one set or two?

She edged back, pressing against the large brick fireplace. Surely no one else was geeky enough to check out the museum… It was a school museum. Uh oh. She'd found the school's make-out spot. *Fly away, lovebirds.* She did not want to see them fluttering in their love nest. She leaned into the painted white brick, shoving into it as if she'd disappear like Santa Claus.

The yellow *Do Not Cross* tape crinkled as a guy grabbed it and ducked underneath. He entered the museum.

He was the leader. The guy she'd stolen a nice long look

at, the perfect specimen. He hit the white plaster wall with the side of his fist, blew out a breath, and ran his other hand through his dark blond hair, messing up the precise cut that was just the right side of over-long on top and shaved on the sides.

Ella shoved even harder into her hiding spot, making herself as small as possible. The brick gave under her weight, and she stumbled. A black, cobweb-covered gap appeared between the fireplace and the wall.

Oh crap.

She'd broken the school's two-hundred-year-old building. Her heart pounded out a sick, done-something-wrong rhythm. What would that cost to fix? Fifty bucks? Five hundred? More? Had she seen any fireplace repairs on HGTV? Grrr. All she could remember was that painting the brick was cheaper than re-facing the front with stacked stone. HGTV said nothing about concealing the big hole between it and the wall. She couldn't afford to fix a broken building. Her insides tightened like someone was stirring them with the fireplace poker.

She shoved at the rough corner. *Get back in place dusty, ash-covered, priceless fireplace.* The bricks shifted, closing enough that a five-dollar tube of white caulk would conceal the opening. Five dollars, she could afford. Priceless, not so much. Then again, she needed her five dollars. She shoved against the brick, narrowing the gap to nothing.

She'd known better, too. Girls named Ella had to stay away from soot machines: that meant bonfires, barbeques, and big ol' fireplaces. If a cinder marked her, she'd take on a Cinderella nickname so fast that the rest of senior year would be marred by it, because nicknames didn't wash off.

"Hello?" The guy's voice was deep and resonant. The melty sound bad boys on TV strived to achieve: insolent, rich, sure of himself. Not her kind of guy. She peeked around the corner, catching his dark blue gaze. Wow. The blue of a Texas thunderstorm, her favorite kind of sky. The air stilled, the barometric pressure rose, and she knew something was coming. He *was* her kind of guy.

"Hello." He strode forward. "I'm Hale Penworth. Senior."

She said nothing.

The sunlight from the window pooled around him. His sun-streaked hair swung against his cheekbones as he turned and caught her dusty message in the window. *Ella Marie Aschen. Why am I here?* "Why *are* you here, Ella?"

Hiding from the other girls. No, not hiding, just taking a break. And checking you out like you came with my tuition. Heat flushed her face. "Admiring the display?" There was no display, just dusty tarps…and him.

His mouth quirked up at one corner. He had a sense of humor. She did like that. She'd give a lot to be the girl who got to place a kiss on his quirky, perfect mouth. It'd be her first kiss, which was her own fault, but she'd think about that later. *Please, please don't have a girlfriend, because I've arrived, and you could be the Yankee-soulmate to my lonesome Texas heart.* Okay. She'd been listening to way too many country songs. But darn, look at him.

Hale blushed and she realized she'd probably been staring at his mouth for a substantial amount of time, pretty much eighty percent of the time she'd known him. His blush snapped her out of the daydream she'd slipped into. This guy with the hot build must have a girlfriend. If he didn't, he wasn't gunning for the new scholarship girl lurking in the museum.

Be civilized. Fake it 'til you feel it. Ella strengthened her resolve, held out a dust-covered hand and moved forward. "I'm new here—" She jerked to a stop. Surprise cut off the debatable brilliance of her next words because she couldn't move, like a chicken caught up by the feet.

Ella pulled forward, but she was being held in place by the invisible hand of an anti-Cupid. *What the...?* She twisted, and looked back. The gap between the fireplace and the wall trapped her skirt in its 240-year-old grip. Why? Why her? Why now? The strangled gasp that came from her lips was as far from a sophisticated introduction as she could imagine making. Fireplaces. Grrr.

His brows drew together. "You okay?"

"Fine." The lie pitched high.

His frown deepened. "My sister Penelope says that, but only when she's not fine."

Penelope. She'd met Penelope Penworth. Penelope was one of those fair-fragile, high-end, model-looking girls. There was nothing fragile about Hale. Great. She'd found a strong, caring, concerned guy and she was stuck like a fly on sticky paper. She wiggled and struggled, she...couldn't...get loose.

Hale moved closer, seeming taller and more stunning all in one quick step. "It's your uniform." He put one hand on her hem and patted the rough brick fireplace with his other. "How'd you get stuck?"

He wasn't too bright, but man was he handsome. The hot, shirtless guy had his hand on her skirt. Was that first base? Second base? Oh, yeah. She bit her lip to hold in a squeak, and silently cursed her awkwardness. She'd worked hard to cast it off last summer, smiling hard at all the

smoothie shop customers. Some shyness must be lingering, because she felt so discombobulated by this situation that she couldn't spit out a coherent sentence. That sucked. If she hadn't been shy before, she would have had the experience to handle this base without her face heating to what had to be cherry-slushy pink.

Hale tugged at her skirt. "It'll have to come off."

She squeak-gasped. Whoa. She was not ready for a home run, no matter how cute he was.

Hale seemed to realize what he'd said. He winced, and his dark blue eyes widened. "I mean; I'll go get some help. A girl. Girl help. I'll get my sister."

Yeah you will, mister. His getting flustered helped for some reason. Ella grabbed his arm. His skin was warm, his arm hard and toned. Geez. *Get a grip. Stop thinking about his body and free yourself. You don't need a man...he has such strong biceps. He could help.* "The fireplace slides a bit. If you push it." She demonstrated with her free hand. Nothing happened. But at least she was getting words out now.

Hale's lips twisted in doubt, but he put out one hand and shoved.

Nothing happened.

He put his shoulder to it, and the brick bit into his tan skin.

So much power. Like Superman, but without a shirt...Aqua-man. "I think it's giving. You're getting it."

He frowned and shoved harder. "It's hundreds of years old. I don't think it moves."

The bricks shifted and groaned.

Dust puffed out.

She pulled, and the pin closing her skirt ripped through the fabric.

Chapter 2

The silver pin pinged across the white marble floor, and the stubborn fireplace held onto her skirt. Dear Lord, hadn't this school heard of zippers, or Velcro?

Ella unrolled like a paper towel off the roll and flew into Hale. His body was solid, muscled, and heated from the sun. His chest was bare…she was gripping bare skin. Holy cow, Massachusetts was giving and giving.

Hale carried the scent of sunshine and spring water with him, like a perfect summer day, made more special because of summer's approaching end. She breathed in and clung to him like he was her float and a big wave was headed her way.

Hale jerked back with insulting speed, knocking into the fireplace bucket. It dumped out its contents: soot and enough poker-related equipment to tangle their feet. Iron clanged against the marble floor as they did the balance dance, flailed, and fell.

He hit the floor with her on top of him. His breath blew from his body. Her elbow and knee slammed into the hearth. Physical pain joined her embarrassment. Her

headband fell forward and off. Her loose brunette curls blocked her view of him and the white room with its new splash of soot.

The clanking stopped, and the room grew quiet with heart-pounding weirdness.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, swiping her curtain of hair back to see him better. "Tell me you're okay." Had she broken him, too?

Hale sucked in a breath and patted her back in a reassuring gesture, like having a hundred-plus pounds plop down on his chest was no problem. Maybe with his physique it wasn't. But he was pretty quiet. She needed to shift off him without doing him any more damage. Breaking the fireplace was one thing, breaking a boy, another. That was the kind of thing that got a girl expelled. And she wasn't leaving this place 'til May.

The museum door swung open. Ella swiveled to it, and her cheek met his rougher cheek. Skin against skin — this definitely qualified as a base. She'd have to email her friends back home about that. Score one for Ella. She breathed in again. Nice. How could she describe him? Picture a hot model—no, a hot *athlete*—dip him in water, warm him in the sun, and lay him out on white marble like a fallen Greek statue. Then jump on the statue. That was this moment.

"Ah-hem." The hacking, throat-clearing sound came from Nadine Chen. She stood in the doorway. Nadine was a snarky piece of work. She wouldn't appreciate the beauty before her. Why couldn't it have been one of the other girls? Even Hale's sister, Penelope. Penelope would have been so preoccupied by her sparkly jewelry she'd have missed Ella floundering here on the museum floor. And if she'd spotted

her, well, she would have been kind. Ella herself strove to be kind. She didn't always succeed, but she tried. Nadine wasn't the kind of girl to try.

Nadine stilled and her pear-green party dress swirled around her knees like Galveston waves floating around a shark. Strands of her up-do swung free and the silky black ends stuck in her red lip gloss, forming whiskers. "OMG." Her shock was fleeting. "Wowsies." She assessed them, and her gaze flitted past them and stuck there. Her eyes widened, and her mouth formed a judgmental O.

Ella turned her head. Her uniform skirt hung from the back of the fireplace like a guilty tartan flag abandoned in the heat of the moment, announcing to the room that shameful skirt-free events had taken place here. *It's not how it looks.* "It's not how—"

Nadine swiped her hair out of her lip gloss. "Making the most of your first day, aren't you?"

Yep. Snark.

"Chill, Nadine," Hale said.

Ohhh, nice, her prince had a gallant side. She did like that in a man.

"Whatever, Hale. I saw you come in here. You're not supposed to be in here." Nadine sounded like Ella's best friend back home's five-year-old sister, but Nadine was seventeen and a senior like them.

Ella straightened her headband, restraining her brunette curls like she could contain the situation, but she floundered when she tried to think of something to say or how to handle this. *Make thoughts words.* She didn't even know how to get up.

"Give us a minute," Hale said, in a tone that expected Nadine to obey.

Ooh, charming, thoughtful, and commanding. She was falling fast. Major crush up ahead. *Brake. Brake.*

Nadine rolled her eyes and walked out, leaving the door slightly ajar in a nosy power move, like Ella's stepmom did with all the cupboards because Ella liked them closed.

Hale regained his feet with one hand, hauling her up with the other.

"Thanks." OMG. She was standing here in a uniform shirt that barely covered the essentials… and tights. She was showing it all off like a naked girl on a spam email. Ella tugged on the hem of her white shirt, but there was no pretending it was a dress. Saving her modesty was impossible. It was hanging from the fireplace. She rubbed her temple with her free hand.

Hale stared at her legs.

Ella waved at the fireplace. "Uh, could you…"

Hale yanked his gaze away and tugged her wool skirt free. The skirt came away with ease now that it had seen to her humiliation. She wrapped it on, and Hale scooped up the silver pin from the floor.

He'd known she needed the pin to hook her skirt. That made him awfully familiar with re-dressing females. Hmmm.

The weight of the St. Erskine pin was very different from the black plastic nametag she'd worn last summer at the smoothie shop, but the pinning mechanism was the same. She slipped it through the side of her skirt, hooked it closed, and then traced the *E* etched onto the surface. The *E* stood for Erskine Preparatory School, but she liked it all the more because it was her initial.

Hale brushed his hands over his cheeks. "I'm Hale. Hale Penworth."

He'd already said that. He was flustered. She, average Ella, had shaken him. It made her feel powerful, made her want to fluster him some more.

The door creaked open, and Nadine stepped back inside, interrupting their private moment. "Really, Hale? You're just now giving her your name?"

Nadine the eavesdropper, worst dorm-mate ever. Ella rubbed at her arms. She should have been warmer now that she was dressed.

Hale worked his mouth. "I thought you left..."

"I thought, why should I leave? This is my school, too. What are you two doing here? Sneaking around? Are you supposed to be here? Shouldn't you be dressing for the Pear Ball?"

The Pear Ball. Of course. More about the Pear Ball. Was Hale taking a date? Ella let her eyes drift closed for a brief second, imagining herself wearing a pear-green gown with a full skirt and a square neckline, dancing with Hale as a slow ballad played. But that wasn't her life. She hadn't been invited. She opened her eyes and stepped toward the door.

"Ella's getting away, Penworth. At least show her to her room. She's my suitemate, you know. Her room's between mine and *Penelope's.*" She said the word *Penelope* with special weight.

If Ella hadn't already learned Penelope was his sister, she may have been concerned Hale had a girlfriend. Nadine was messy, stirring up drama like a blender crushing up blueberries.

Hale had been behind her, but he reached the door first. "Nadine." He said the name like a goodbye and left without excuses. His sure steps took him out into the soft August day.

At home, it was still one hundred degrees. The temperature hovered in the seventies here. Amazing, like winter in August.

Nadine blocked Ella's path, and then stepped aside barely enough so that she could go by her. "We'll talk later."

Great. "You're not going to say anything about this, right?" Ella hated the pleading note that had entered her voice, but she'd full on beg if Nadine kept her mouth shut.

Nadine hummed a tune Ella didn't know.

Ella took that as a *sure*, but she didn't believe her. She hurried down the museum steps, and caught up to Hale. He was going uphill. Did he have any pull with Nadine? Could he tell her to keep quiet and make her do it? "I'm the new girl."

"Welcome to St. Erskine." Hale's words were formal, and she couldn't read his expression from behind him. She picked up her pace.

"We don't get many transfers."

No kidding; this school was beyond exclusive. She hadn't even heard of it until her Internet search let her know it was for the moneyed elite. Not like the customers who could afford the large smoothie and didn't make their kids share elite, but elite-elite.

Hale was too polite to ask more details, though his unspoken questions hung in the air.

Ella ignored his curiosity, because she had a bigger problem. Nadine had ammo to gossip about her, and fodder for nicknames: Ella Unpinned. Ella Disenchanted. Cinder slut. … Bad. She had to prevent it.

They stood on the steps leading to the palatial school that looked more like a castle than any public school she'd ever seen. If the school were a castle, then Hale could be her

Prince Charming and save her from the rumor-breathing dragon Nadine. He could do it by adding meaning to their encounter. He could say they were in a relationship. He could pretend to be her boyfriend. He could save her. "About that." Ella jerked her thumb back at the small stone building, the place of their grand meeting, the spot that threatened her downfall. "I'm a senior."

"Me, too."

"I'm new." Er. She'd already said that. *Get it together, Ella. Perform damage control.*

His lips quirked up on one side. "I'm not."

He was a bit of a tease. She liked that. "I want to finish the year without drama, without being labeled the 'girl who polishes the museum floor with a guy she's just met.'"

Hale didn't say anything, but his eyes twinkled.

Her heart beat quicker. She liked his expression. How would he look when she proposed her plan? Agreeable? Pleased? Ella blew out a breath. "I want you to pretend we're dating."

Chapter 3

Ella had concocted a scheme worthy of a fairy tale. Now Prince Charming had to agree. "If Nadine talks about what she saw, tell people we're dating. Then later you can say we broke up." It was a perfect plan. They'd fake a relationship… spend time together…and if Prince Charming happened to fall for her… Hello Happily Ever After.

All he had to do was agree.

Silence hung in the air.

Ella kicked at the orange-red maple leaf clinging to the toe of her Oxford shoe like syrup on fingertips. *Agree, darn it.*

More silence. Like the mall had closed and the building was empty silence.

"Dating?" Hale shook his head. "That's not going to happen." The sun set in the distance. Red and yellow leaves brushed over the stone steps cutting through the school grounds leading up to the building. The leaves kept moving but neither of them budged.

Embarrassment froze her insides and wouldn't let her feet

move, though she wanted to run to her dorm and pretend she hadn't suggested they fake dating, and that he hadn't just turned her down. She would not be writing home about this. *Please move, feet.*

Hale motioned for her to go ahead of him. "I don't date."

No way, he didn't date. He was letting her down gently because he didn't want to date *her*. Unless... maybe he had a reason not to date. "You're already seeing someone?"

"No."

Her foot slipped. As if this moment wasn't beautiful enough. She righted herself and climbed upward. "So?"

"It's complicated."

He'd stared at her legs too long not to be straight. "I'm not trying to complicate anything."

Stop helping him escape. He needed to understand the situation.

She spun, forcing him to a stop again. Being a step higher placed them eye-to-eye. She didn't let his dark blue gaze stop her; she fixed him with the power of her own blue stare. "I'm not complicated." She wasn't. She was just a girl trying to finish senior year, then get out and get a job. Maybe have a date, definitely have a kiss, but that was it. That was her plan for senior year: enjoy the normal stuff and avoid big surprises.

Hale gestured back to the museum. "Look, don't worry. I'll shut Nadine down."

That was the best he was going to do for her. She let out a breath. "Promise?"

"Promise."

He wasn't interested in her or he would have gone along with her scheme. Or, she was so repellent he couldn't bother.

She didn't think so. She'd kind of liked a guy at the food court, but hadn't shown it. He'd liked her, too, but she'd only found out after she'd said she was moving. So she wasn't horrible.

They climbed the rest of the way in silence. The boarding school's impressive honey stone glowed in the sunlight, a lot like the *Welcome to St. Erskine Prep* brochure that had arrived in Texas just three nights ago, along with instructions and a plane ticket. She couldn't believe she'd taken the opportunity, but room, board, and being away from the stepmom had seemed like a grand idea.

School back home hadn't started, and the term was just starting here. Besides, home reminded her of Mom being gone. She shook off the thought and paused to appreciate the beauty around her. The East Coast was new and foreign. But a four-hour flight from Houston to Boston, plus a long drive, and here she was. Her life had changed that fast.

Hale looked back.

Ella tilted her head toward the museum. "Why did you hit the wall?" It was a personal question, but in the still, cool quiet it felt okay to ask.

Hale blushed under his tan and looked as if he wouldn't answer, and then he gestured to the river. "Our times are crap. We need our 2k up, but I can't do optional practices and study at the same time. It's a choice, you know. Life's always a choice, no matter how hard you work. I'm putting in the hours, but I'm not making it happen."

Huh. Usually her friends were like, *This chicken's been under the heat lamp for eight hours, should I throw it out or take it home and eat it?* or *Blue purse or black purse with this outfit?* That advice she could give. She wasn't used to being

around high achievers and didn't know what to tell him, so she kept quiet.

They went in, and he showed her as far as her dormitory's second-floor girls' common room. The bedrooms branched around the large living room like fingers from a palm. Each room was a single and each had an en suite. She'd never had her own bathroom before, or stayed anywhere this nice. The building's interior was a mix of ancient and modern. The solid wood paneling and heavy wooden desks could have been here since the site was founded. But the computer outlets, cell phone ports, and cushy Y-shaped chairs, all in St. Erskine blue, were as up-to-date as they come.

She'd tried to act cool when the girls in her hall had swung by last night, but it had been overwhelming. It had felt like every girl at the school wanted to meet her, like someone joining after school started was quite the anomaly. They'd had so many questions, and their curiosity had continued into today.

Now she was back and the common room was full.

Kira, a redhead, wiggled her neon orange nails and wolf-whistled. "Hale, you are an absolute mess. Need a hand cleaning up?" Kira's voice was pure Yankee, and she wore a brocade dress in pear green with her sassy attitude.

Hale mutely shook his head.

Another girl purred at him. Ella couldn't remember her name. Then it came to her. Shayla Najiri. The curvy, long-haired girl was curled up in an armchair with a magazine, wearing the mandatory uniform. A few select girls wore green party dresses and everyone else wore uniforms. The girls in green had been invited to the Pear Ball. The girls in uniforms, like Ella, hadn't been invited.

Penelope was an invitee. She rolled her eyes at the attention her brother was receiving. Her eyes were a darker blue than Ella's but lighter than Hale's. While pretty, Penelope's eyes didn't pack the same punch as his. Her dress was one of the best, though. Shades of green darkened at her waist, giving her slim frame an hourglass shape. Matching green crystals sparked from her hairpins, and framed the corner of her eyes. Penelope yawned. "Try to remember he's my brother."

"Penelope." Hale smiled and it was more affectionate and indulgent than teasing. She could tell Penelope was the reason he hadn't bolted from the room with all the girls staring at him like he was the statue of David and they'd bought exhibit tickets.

"Why aren't you ready?" Penelope sat up straighter. "You were at late practice. How was practice? What did Fritz say?" Her voice took on energy as she spoke about Fritz. Ella hadn't seen Fritz, but from the way Penelope talked about him, he was blue ribbon prime. She was interested in seeing that.

Hale's smile dropped, and he shrugged one bare shoulder. He must carry clothes so well, but why bother when he looked like that without them?

"Did you even talk to Fritz about opening practice to onlookers?"

Hale's neutral face turned to a frown, and he shifted his weight like a skittish bronco. Whether it was at the thought of Fritz or open practice she didn't know. "I didn't have time to bring it up. There were people on the dock watching."

Girls had been watching. She'd seen them swarming the team from the museum's window before she'd turned her

attention to the rowers. Tanned skin. Fit bodies. Led by Hale. Sigh.

"The dock's not close enough. We want to be on another boat." Penelope's face scrunched. "You had time to bring it up. We want to watch from the water, not the dock. We want to see the action. Get selfies."

"Oh yeah." Kira spun around and backed toward Hale with her phone held high in selfie-position. She made the back-up beeping noise.

"That's not helping, Kira," Penelope said.

Hale retreated to the door. "Gotta hit the showers."

Another wolf-whistle caused his steps to quicken.

Ella used their attention on Hale to slink into her room.

She washed off the soot, changed into yoga pants, a smoothie shop T-shirt, and was half daydreaming about Hale and half reviewing her class schedule when a knock sounded on her door.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The door swung in, and she was pinned in place by Nadine's narrowed brown eyes. "What were you two up to at the museum? How do you even know Hale?"

"I don't." *Butt out.*

Nadine's thin black brows arched high enough to meet her straight black bangs. "Uh huh." Nadine's green dress had a geometric print, and that thick-lined look that spoke of structure, tailoring, and wealth. "He's friends with my boyfriend, Rawlings. So you can tell me. What's the real story?"

She needed to make nice. Nadine had something on her. Even if it was a false something. Ella curled into a cross-legged position on top of her bed. "Great dress. But I

thought we had to wear our uniforms on school grounds?" *Advise, oh wise classmate who's been at this school longer than twenty-four hours.*

"Some of us are invited to a Founders' Day get-together, the Pear Ball. Very exclusive." Nadine was very pretty, with inky dark hair. Her narrowed eyes and sharp tone were less attractive. She gave Ella's bedroom a quick, assessing glance that included a sniff at the Regency novel on her nightstand. "We were using this space for our extra stuff. No one said anything about a new girl until yesterday, and we had to move our things out of here so they could clean before you arrived. One of us would have chosen this room if we had known it was up for grabsies."

Too bad. So sad.

Nadine sat down on the foot of the bed, her narrow butt nearing the school crest on the light blue blanket, her posture perfect: back straight, knees to the side. "Not that you're not welcome here." Her gaze went to Ella's waist. "Very few people transfer senior year, you know."

"It's no big deal." It *was* a big deal. When she'd received the first invitation, she hadn't wanted to move, and she'd refused. Then a packet had arrived with additional information about the school and a trunk of uniforms like they hadn't understood her saying no. She'd gone to the kitchen where her stepmom was on a website researching how to put a house up for sale, the house Ella had always lived in. If she had to move anyway, why not? At least she'd be away from the Step.

"Again, you are very welcome and all." Nadine's sharp glance searched her like she'd give up all her secrets because Nadine was talking to her.

One thing her former shyness had given Ella was the ability to stay quiet. She didn't feel the need to fill the empty air.

Nadine picked at a thread on the blanket with a nail polished pear green. "Are your parents ambassadors and you just got back in the country?"

Ella gave her door a pointed look. "Just a run of the mill scholarship kid." The lack of cache in that should propel Nadine out of the room like a fake fingernail popping off.

Instead, Nadine's nails dug deeper into the bedspread. "Erskine's doesn't offer scholarships."

"Evidently they do." Ella bit her bottom lip. She hadn't meant to snap, but Nadine's probing and ignoring her hints to go was annoying.

"Well, whatever ups our ranks, I say. You're too slender and pale to be sporty. What are you, like, valedictorian? Not that you could beat my boyfriend's scores. No one beats Rawlings' scores. He's going to be valedictorian, but where'd we steal you from?"

The smoothie shop manager always *stole* one of the workers from the early shift to stay late and close up. She'd had to stay late a lot. She hadn't liked the phrase then, and she didn't like it now.

Nadine propped her black stiletto on Ella's trunk. "Nice trunk. For a *scholarship* kid." The trunk's body was leather, with the designer's signature embossed in gold, and gold hinges set into the back. The leather went around the whole thing, not just the front, and not just in detailed accents on the edges.

It was an expensive trunk.

Ella frowned.

"Yet, you're here," Nadine's voice lowered, "on *scholarship*?"

"I am." *Get out. Leave. The ball's waiting; the pears are wilting like my patience.*

"Ah." The two-letter word was weighted with a world of division. "I'm fine with that. I'm not like one of those old money snobs, or those no-money, old-name snobs."

"Good to know."

"Yeah. I mean, I don't really get why a girl on scholarship would have the same room as the rest of us." Nadine glanced at the door that led to the en suite bath. "It doesn't seem fair, because my family paid and all, but that's more of a practical question." She stopped picking at the blanket and smoothed the silk of her dress.

Now that Ella looked at her dress closely, it wasn't as pretty as she'd thought, too much green for Nadine's complexion.

"And the rates here are significant. My family's into investing; we know significant. Money matters. Big money buys goods and keeps the capitalism rolling, rolling, rolling."

It was a weird moment. Ella didn't feel unwelcome or welcome. Just out of place. She moved over to her window seat overlooking the lush green grounds edged with a forest of green colors. Where did she belong? Would she like it here? She wanted to.

Penelope popped into the doorway and waved at Nadine. "Come on, you." She gave Ella an apologetic wince for not including her. "I want to get there before Fritz and stake out a good spot." She smoothed her poufy skirt. "Do you think Fritz will like me in this?"

"You're a Penworth. Everyone will like you." Nadine turned to Ella. "Fritz is a Strait. You've seen Congressman Strait's campaign commercials? *Family values Take back old*

America. Fritz is old money. Old name, too. Not that it's difficult to figure out who's who here. Just look at the crew. They're all old money, old names." She followed Penelope out. "See you later." She didn't close the door behind her.

The door gaped open where anyone could look in. Ella went over and shut it.

She spent the rest of the evening with the Regency novel. The roguish duke was pursuing the reluctant heroine. "*Be mine. I command it.*"

Contessa glanced back at her chaperone, ensuring Lady Maude was out of earshot. "Would that I could, my duke." Longing rolled off her tongue like cook's jellied trifle. "Would that I could, my love."

Contessa's reluctance sure made that Duke eager. Ella dog-eared the page, sent a few emails to friends back home, and then poured over the student handbook. The campus was on three hundred acres with a polo field, a ten-mile track, and a lake. Their tuition covered classes, class materials, a salon, cleaning, and shoe shines. Fees, taxes, and tips included. Rich kids looked more pampered than everyone else because salon treatments came with their homework. She picked at the rough edge of her fingernail, got online, and booked a manicure.

Chatter and closing door sounds came from the commons as the partiers returned. It was 11:30 p.m. They'd beaten the midnight curfew.

Her suitemates seemed nice enough, but they'd been all over Hale. If word got out that Ella had been rolling on the floor with him, they'd turn on her like expired perfume. Tomorrow would be bad if Nadine decided to make the most of her story. She needed to know things were okay.

11:35 p.m. Her first class was at eight in the morning, but she was more worried than tired.

Ella pulled herself out of bed, sort of on autopilot. Talk to Hale or talk to Nadine? She slipped on her worn sneakers instead of the mandatory Oxfords, threw on a hoodie, and eased into the common room. There was a flash of red hair as Kira went into her room and a slam as the door closed behind her. The other girls were either in their rooms or hadn't made it back.

Ella snuck out.

She went down the hall and turned left. The halls were paneled with dark mahogany from shoulder-height down. Above that, pale blue wallpaper matched the blue in their plaid uniform skirts and ties.

She took the carved wooden staircase up a flight to the third-floor boys' dormitories. She needed assurances. She was going to find Hale and get them.

Chapter 4

Going to the boys' dorm with twenty minutes left until curfew was a risk, but it was only one flight of stairs. Ella had enough time, and even if she didn't, she was going anyway. The big clock at the end of the hall mirrored the one in the girls' hall. Ella found a good spot and waited.

And waited.

Guy after guy returned. None of those guys were Hale. She shifted on her feet as her boredom fought her anxiety. Hale probably had spoken with Nadine like he'd said he would and told her not to tell anyone about their museum incident, and all was fine. Sure, she had no friends and no sway here, but he did.

11:50.

The clock ticked another minute closer to midnight.

This was a mistake. She bit her lip. It would not be good to screw up curfew on night two. She moved to slink downstairs.

Hale and another guy were coming up. Both gave her the once-over. Hale's was a friendly, and surprised look. Like,

Hi, Ella, you must be lost. The younger guy's was a sharp assessing look. Like, *Hi, Ella, you must be here to rob us.*

Hale greeted her politely, like it wasn't nighttime outside the boys' dorm on a dark stairwell. "Ella."

"Hale."

The younger guy cleared his throat. "I'm Rawlings. Nathaniel Rawlings." His voice cracked.

Rawlings. That made him Nadine's boyfriend. Had they talked? About her? Ella gave a small wave.

Hale motioned for him to go on up, and Rawlings narrowed his hazel eyes between the two. The sharp intelligence in his gaze belied his youth. Though he was lean and tall, he was definitely younger than them by at least a year. He leaned back on the balustrade. "What brings you here at this hour?" The question was brisk and pointed, a question from someone used to getting answers. Did they teach that posh rich boy tone in one of the classes? Would some feminine version of it replace her Texas twang?

"Uh." *Probably not.*

"Shove off, Rawlings." Hale took her arm. "The hall monitors sweep through at midnight. Midnight's no joke around here."

"Sorry." Ella lowered her voice. "I couldn't sleep. I had to know—did you talk to Nadine? Is my first day of classes going to be 'Oh, a new girl' or 'Oh, it's that skank chasing Hale?'" Ella rubbed her arms over her sweatshirt. She had come upstairs to the guys' dorms late at night. Nothing good ever happened after midnight, or so the Step said. She was giving him the wrong impression.

Hale winced and his hard expression softened. "I had a word with Nadine. There's nothing to worry about."

"Thanks."

Now there was no reason to stand there. Other than to admire how he looked in his dark suit and tie. Though not as good as he'd looked in his swim uniform, shirtless, tan, athletic. It was bedtime; he would be taking his shirt off again soon. Probably not here in the stairwell though, so there was no reason to hang around. "'Night."

She slipped away on his whispered, "Goodnight."

***

Ella had made it to the last class—chemistry. The preparatory academy had smaller classes and a higher-level workload than public school. Nothing so far had been too terrifying or too different. She could blend. Honestly, the strangest thing was seeing the same group of kids in all her classes, but small schools were probably just like that. No escape, so they'd better all play nice.

Chem lab smelled like chem lab and looked like chem lab. One second in, and she knew this class would be her favorite. The teacher, Ms. Tenisha Tooli, a tall thin woman with dark hair and intelligent brown eyes, performed the standard introductions with little drama and pointed her to an empty seat at the front table with Penelope.

Penelope greeted Ella with a friendly grin that said, *Hi, new girl.*

Ella smiled back.

Her table was prime real estate, because Hale sat to her right.

He smiled at her, too. Okay, it was a *greet-the-new kid* smile, and not a *you're-the-most-amazing-beauty alive* smile, but still, a smile. Did people kiss smiles?

Hale had an open notebook with a few loose papers sticking out along with Post-its. Penelope's was the same, but her Post-its and pages all aligned. One of them had stolen the neat gene and it wasn't Hale.

"Okay, class, let's get started." Ms. Tooli moved to the whiteboard.

Ella slid her notebook over the table's edge and sketched while the teacher lectured. She drew epic gown designs on the left side and filled the right page with notes.

Penelope elbowed her. "The guy beside Hale is Fritz," she whispered.

Hale's frame blocked the smaller Fritz, who was like an uptight snooty Ken doll. She didn't get it. But she gave Penelope one of those smile-nods that praised her taste.

That's how the rest of class went. Penelope stared at Fritz. Ella stared at Hale. He had great posture. She tried to keep her interest subtle, unlike Penelope. No one would notice her subtle peeks. Penelope's attention was glued to Fritz like he was her new smart phone.

Ms. Tooli frowned and swiped at the screen on her computer tablet. "The office wants us to re-shuffle lab partners." She looked around the room and the lines between her brows deepened. "They suggest I ensure an even gender split. Every group should have one guy and one girl."

Why? Couldn't guys handle science on their own? Maybe they'd be getting those egg babies to co-parent. With these kids, it'd probably be Fabergé rather than grocery grade A. Maybe she'd get partnered with Hale. Hale and Ella... Hella...Hella egg baby.

"One guy, one girl," one of the guys echoed the teacher, but he made her instructions sound dirty.

Not him, please.

"That's enough, Drake," Ms. Tooli said, though her reprimand was half-hearted.

Heat lit Ella's face, heat that had nothing to do with the Bunsen burners, and everything to do with the grumbles starting up. No one would want to be stuck with the new kid. Okay, that was totally paranoid. They'd be fine with her as a partner.

Maybe not Rawlings. He shot off answers before anyone else, and he'd be annoyed with her determined mediocrity.

Not him, please.

Maybe not Fritz. The Ken doll was too much of a snob to want to be partnered with the scholarship girl, she could tell.

Not him, please.

Maybe not even Hale; he'd already turned her down. Who would want to hatch an egg baby with her? Oh freak, who *did* that leave? She spun to face the back of the room. It was full of prep school strangers. She didn't want to nest with any of them.

Ms. Tooli pulled up an image of the classroom on the smart board. There were more grumbles. Ms. Tooli wasn't having it. She squared off her shoulders and faced them, hands on hips, sensible shoes parted. "Really? From the quality of yesterday's assignments, I'm surprised you'd cling so tightly to the status quo."

Nadine sat straighter and leaned away from Kira, her current lab partner, as if Kira had spilled a vial of Ebola on herself and was licking at it.

"I got no one to blame but me," Penelope whispered. "I was alone. Do you think I'll get Fritz?" Her voice almost

broke a whisper as she said the name of her crush. "I'd take Rawlings. He's a sure A."

"He's younger than us, right?"

"He's a grade skipper. Could be in college now, but his parents don't want him to miss out on 'peer experiences.' He's besties with my brother, so I know the family. Lovely people."

"Nadine doesn't care that he's younger?" The girls at her old school only dated up, well, unless the guy was in their grade, and then a year was okay, like a September baby and a June birthday. But not a full year or more. Nadine the cradle robber.

"It is only a year. Besides, he's the smartest, the richest…" Penelope's eyes said, *You get how these things work.*

She was learning.

"Enough talking, let's get you moving." Ms. Tooli clicked again and boxes populated the screen. Table four by the window read, *Ella Aschen and Hale Penworth.*

Chapter 5

Hale Penworth and Ella Aschen. Hale and Ella. Ella and Hale. Ella's heart gave a pleased jolt, and delight shimmered inside her. Yeah. Mental high-five to the office. She kept her expression neutral, playing it cool.

The chemistry teacher went on with her announcements, but nothing really mattered to Ella after she heard she'd be paired with Hale. Hale and Ella.

"I got Fritz." Penelope's mouth moved like she couldn't get enough air in.

"Breathe."

Penelope sucked in a big breath, flooding her brain with oxygen once again. She moved her gaze from the Ken doll and scanned the screen, nodding and humming over the pairings like she was debating the merits of different shoes at the mall. "Hale needs an A in this class. You'll be fine. Rawlings got his girlfriend. He probably arranged for the switches. He's a hacker, you know." She rose and darted over to Fritz, not waiting for Ella's response. Her eagerness and speed caused her Oxfords to squeak on the linoleum. Not her coolest move.

"Thanks," Ella mumbled anyway. She hadn't seen Hale all day and now he wasn't just in her chem class, he was going to be her lab partner. She moved to her new spot, getting there as the last couple left. How was Hale going to feel about her being foisted on him?

Foisted. Funny word. That's kind of how she'd lived her life. Foisted onto her mom by a dad who left before she was born. Mom married and then she was left with her stepdad after Mom died. He remarried and she was left with her stepmom while he went out of town to work as often as he could. A stepmom who kept her around because of Ella's small monthly inheritance. Ella shook herself out of her head and wiped her palms on the skirt of her uniform. Hale wasn't her family. This wasn't a custody issue. It was a temporary lab partnership destined to end in May when they graduated.

Hale slid in beside her. He smelled like a fresh shower. The back of his hair was damp. Did he have gym before this? *Don't sniff him. Don't sniff him.* Ella leaned his way. Nice shower gel. Beach. Ocean. Sunshine. She couldn't identify the notes. She took another small subtle sniff. Nice.

Ms. Tooli said, "Today, I want to go over the fall senior projects. Let's start with a few questions." She moved in front of the first desk like a rancher with a prod going after a stray. "We'll begin with a classic. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Blech. That dug the prod right into her side.

"Banker," Nadine said, though it wasn't her turn. "Fiscal growth is the most important part of progress." Her gaze got stuck on a set of beakers and an alarm flashed in front of her face. "Right behind science."

Ms. Tooli nodded.

Other students gave answers, but the question had Ella stumped. She wanted to be a rooted member of the community. She wanted a job and a family. But those weren't goals she could toss out there. Not when the kids around her were saying, "Lawyer, Judge, CEO, CFO, Congressman."

"Mr. Strait?"

Fritz clasped his hands together. "Follow in my father's footsteps: law school, judge, congressman." He punctuated each job by thrusting his clasped fists in the air, like he meant it more because his hands were moving.

Penelope clapped like he'd said astronaut hero.

Ms. Tooli gave Penelope a look that said, *Restrain yourself.* "Ambition is wonderful, Mr. Strait. But choose a career that means something to you, not just to your father."

Fritz held up his index finger. "Family first is the basis of our platform. The Strait Way. There is nothing more important."

Ella held in a snicker.

No one else laughed.

Ms. Tooli bobbed her head left and right in a non-committal motion and moved in front of their table. "Hale?

"Doctor."

Oh. Wow. He was smart. That was attractive. Her stepmom preferred a more clueless breed of man. Her stepdad had been goofy over her until she'd moved in. Then he couldn't wait to get on the road and leave her behind. The fact that he was leaving Ella too hadn't mattered, like a disposable cup dropped on the rubber no-slip mat, write it up like a loss.

Ms. Tooli stood before Hale, looking encouraging and challenging. "Specialty?"

Don't say *feet*.

"Undecided."

She got that.

Penelope raised her hand. "I want to change my answer. I want to design perfume."

Ella winced on Penelope's behalf. Teachers loved to mock frivolous answers.

Nadine wrinkled her nose.

All this nose wrinkling made her think she'd imagined how nice Hale smelled. She gave another subtle sniff. Nope. That cologne or shower gel was enchanting, in a manly way.

Ms. Tooli held up her index finger and tapped her cheek. She didn't wear makeup. That was different from back home. "Perfume. Interesting. Neuroscience is making extraordinary connections between scent and memory and mood. That's a fascinating choice."

"True," Nadine said. "Good point, Ms. Tooli."

The teacher turned to Ella, waiting for her answer. Ms. Tooli braced her feet. She'd stand there all day, no matter how long it took. She wouldn't dismiss class until Ella gave an answer. There was nothing worse or longer than those seconds after the bell rang and the teacher had her pinned there with some question or the other. This was like that.

There was no avoiding the question. It was like the ladies with the specialty smoothies. They'd wait until the oranges were peeled, the lemons were de-seeded, and the nuts shelled as if their time had no value, and there was no one else in line.

Ms. Tooli would wait.

She had to give an answer.

Ella eased her notebook closed with hot hands. At her

old school, she could have gone with *fracking*. Everyone would have understood fracking. *Cha-ching*, who cared if earthquakes in Texas were now a thing? Focus. What was the industry here? Revolutionary war silver polishing?

She had to give an answer. She went with the harmless, "I have no idea."

Penelope gasped.

Fritz frowned.

Nadine recoiled.

Hale turned on his stool to face her.

She'd clearly said something really wrong. She wasn't sure what. But it was really wrong.

Ms. Tooli moved directly in front of her. "If you don't strive for something, you end up with nothing."

Several students turned pitying glances her way, mushed mouths, a few sympathetic nods.

"I expect a ten-page paper on the possibilities for your future."

Oh. Ella understood their pity now. Ten pages on algae would have been easier. Because when every spare dime went to bills, and every spare hour went to working, or looking for that next job because layoffs were coming...well, there were no ten pages of options.

She stilled her fingertips, which had been tapping on her closed notebook. This paper could be the project she tanked to keep her grade from soaring too high. It would keep her nicely in the middle. Who needed the competition, the rivalry, the spiteful drama? She'd seen it all and didn't want any of it. She wanted to end senior year as average Ella. No enemies, maybe a friend. Just end it grateful for not working doubles and having enough of everything, live a life with no

surprises. These kids didn't have the slightest clue how lucky they were. And she wasn't going to be the one to tell them. "Yes, ma'am. I'll work on that."

Or not.

"Pop quiz," Ms. Tooli said.

Students groaned; Ms. Tooli didn't care. "The earth's core is made up mostly of…"

"Nickle and iron." Rawlings jumped on the first one.

"Above that?"

"Silicon, magnesium." Hale took the second and supplied two of the minerals.

Ella let the kids around her answer the rest and idly traced the chemical structures in her notebook. Aluminum, oxygen, calcium, potassium. Sixteen students. So every eighth time, she raised her hand, trying to keep her error ratio in line with the rest of the class. Yep, her grade would fall in the middle where she needed it to be.

Ms. Tooli checked the clock. "I'd like you to spend the last ten minutes of class brainstorming your projects with your new partners. They don't have to be only science. But they need a science element, and they need to be epic. Get a substantial list going."

Ella flipped to a clean page on her notebook and tapped her pen at Hale. *Okay, doctor, what have you got? Please don't let it involve feet.* "I'll write them down. What are you thinking?"

Chapter 6

Hale shifted on the chem lab stool and smiled a compassionate smile like she was offering to help fix the ozone layer. "I'll think of something. You don't have to worry about it."

The pity embarrassed her. So did his offer. After all her wrong answers, she didn't blame him. He didn't need her lowering his science grade, not when he wanted to be a doctor. She pinched her lips together. Maybe she could do better in this one class. But just this one.

Chimes sounded, signaling the end of the day. She hopped off the stool.

"Hold up." Hale's mouth twisted. "About the project."

It was her project, too. "I can help." She fidgeted with the hem of her cardigan. Cardigan or blazer or vest...those were her three uniform options. Maybe they'd do a project on that holy trinity.

He leaned in and stared at her.

The moment was charged. She was aware of his breathing, his warmth, his perfect hands.

"Get a room, you two," Drake said, making his girlfriend Kira giggle.

Hale blushed and pulled away. "I don't date."

"What?" She hadn't asked him. Why didn't he date? Curiosity warred with her pride. "I didn't ask." She sort of had when she'd asked him to fake date, but she wasn't going there.

"It's not you. I don't date anyone."

She would go there. "I really wasn't asking you out before. I asked you to pretend." Her cheeks heated with the lie. She wouldn't have minded if the pretense had turned into something more.

"I mean, I dated last year." He turned his hands so his masculine palms lay open. "You probably heard."

No. She'd heard about the Pear Ball, Fritz, and how awesome the rowing team was. No one had said anything about Hale's ex-girlfriend. Who? A touch of jealousy made her tilt her chin. She wouldn't ask. "No. And I really was trying to protect my reputation, not ask you out." She dug in, clinging to her lie like yogurt clinging to the bottom of the carton.

The words seemed to get through to him that time. He jerked as if to the present. "Of course you weren't."

Finally. He believed her. They were the only two left in class, but neither shifted toward the door. Her mood eased with the new dynamic. "I don't date either." It was sort of true.

"Why?"

"Used to be shy." That was only the partial truth. The whole truth had to do with losing Mom, her stepdad leaving, and then living with her stepmom.

Hale softened his eyes. He had such a lovely expression for such a big guy. She wouldn't have been shy with him. She would have melted like caramel in a heated blender. She moved closer.

Penelope rushed back in and hooked her arm, shattering their interlude. "Come on." Penelope tugged.

No. I'm talking to your brother. "What is it?" Their dorm had better be on fire. On fire with magical flames that could only be put out by her.

Penelope tilted her head and arched her brows at Hale, giving him a triumphant look, daring him to challenge her. The large blue crystals in her round silver earrings flashed like warning lights. "Drake said we can watch practice from one of the boats. He's getting it down for us and clearing it with Coach. We have to get ready. We can't go looking like this."

Hale's mouth twisted.

***

Getting ready meant going up to their rooms and primping. It didn't take long, and Ella went to Penelope's room to wait for her. Penelope brushed pink blush across her cheekbones, and gave Ella an assessing look over the makeup brush. "You might want a jacket. It's colder on the water."

Ella didn't have a jacket. She pulled her cardigan sleeves down to her wrists. "I'm good, thanks."

Penelope dusted off the magnet she'd glued to the back of her blush compact and stuck it on the metal board on the wall above her vanity. Neat trick. Ella liked a clean countertop, too, but she kept everything put away in closed drawers. Penelope finished her touch ups, clapped, and

popped up. Her face glowed. She hadn't really needed the blush; her face was pink enough at the thought of seeing Fritz.

They went into the commons, where seven other girls were chatting and waiting for them. Nine of them were going. "We can only have nine, because there are eight seats, and one for the Coxie. That's Nadine. She's like a coach."

And Ella had made the cut. Feeling included was a warm fuzzy feeling, but feelings wouldn't keep her warm on the water.

The other girls all wore light jackets over their uniforms, and Ella made a note to check in with her stepmom. The trunk hadn't included anything warmer than the cardigan, and nothing she brought from Texas would be warm enough to protect her from a Massachusetts winter.

They went down the main steps of the school, staying together all the way down to the boathouse. There was a nine-seater tied up at the dock, ready for them.

"As Coxie, I'll give the order." Nadine pointed to Penelope. "Take the bow."

Nadine put everyone into position, and Ella went last. The wind whipped over her as she lowered herself into the boat and took a spot on the bench seat. It was sunny enough that the breeze felt lovely. She grasped the oars with unfamiliar hands. Weird to be sitting backward, not facing in the direction they were headed. Only Nadine faced that way. She'd be guiding them.

There were brackets down by her feet, but as this wasn't competitive rowing, just a scenic spin around the lake, she didn't think she needed to lock in.

"Row," Nadine said.

Ella chopped the oar down into the water and slid along the seat, looking backward over her shoulder. The foot brackets would have helped. She adjusted her grip and gained a smoother stroke. Their efforts took them out midstream. It was a rush, being away from land and the dock, but this short trip made her arms and legs burn and her palms hurt. She must be doing it wrong because this was impossibly hard.

Nadine held up her palm. "Hold."

"Hold? We aren't going to catch them?" Penelope asked.

"There's only five guys, but they're number one in the state. How would we 'catch' them?" Nadine didn't straight out call Penelope stupider than a water squid, but it was in her tone. She narrowed her brown eyes. "Unless you know something I don't know?"

Penelope ducked her head. "No." She'd removed her jewelry to come down to the water and didn't look like herself without the sparkle.

The other girls had their phones out and were practicing poses for their selfies. Two had selfie sticks. A smartphone had come in Ella's trunk with a note that it was paid through for the year, unlimited everything. It hadn't said anything about free replacements if dropped in the river so she'd left it in her room.

Penelope leaned back so she'd be in her shot. "Make pursed lips by saying *mocha*. Exaggerate those 'm's and 'o's, ladies."

"Mocha."

"Now duck lips."

The boat rocked, and Ella grabbed onto the seat. The crew was flying by on their boat. Or was it a skiff? A scull?

She needed to do her research. Nadine had been right. They wouldn't have come anywhere near them with their clumsy efforts. The girls dropped the selfie poses and adjusted their cameras to get shots of the guys. Their boat swooshed through the water, mist flying, their motions in unison. No way they were getting good photos.

"Row." Nadine sliced her hand in front of her throat. "We're heading back."

The guys had their boat unloaded and were heading in the boathouse before the girls even tied off at the dock. And they hadn't been that far away. They would have been better off watching from the shore.

Nadine pointed at her. "Go."

Ella hopped up. She put one foot on the side and moved to get on the dock. The boat rocked under her.

She slipped.

Weightless.

Splash.

Wet.

Cold.

Embarrassment rushed over her. Water rushed over her. She dropped like anyone not wearing a life vest—straight down.

Chapter 7

The underwater cold stole Ella's breath. The shock choked her, paralyzed her.

Kick.

Move.

Lungs burning, she shoved her arms down and kicked at the water. She broke free and the wind whipped into her face, now icier, and far less pleasant.

"Ella!" The shout came from Penelope.

The girls were screaming advice and pointing. Nadine had her hands out and looked like she was stopping Penelope from diving in. "She's up. It's okay. I've got this."

Hale knelt on the dock and reached out to her. "Take my hand." His voice was deep and serious.

Ella kicked, drawing closer. *Thank you, Gulf of Mexico, for teaching me to swim in murky water and for being warm.*

Hale pulled her up, and she stood there shivering in her wet school uniform, the wool cardigan soaked through, the briny smell of the river clinging to her. The lightest sunlight touched her face, but didn't warm her. She shivered harder,

feeling for the first time in her life that cliché, *it was so cold, she didn't know if she'd ever be warm again.* She dripped water down onto the wooden planks under her feet. Hale rubbed up and down her arms with his hands. The warmth helped. She wanted closer.

Girls got out of the boat behind her, no one else taking a dip. They murmured a few sympathetic words her way, and then they were drawn over to the group of boys by the boathouse.

Penelope shrugged out of her jacket and handed it to her. Penelope was at least two sizes smaller. Ella clutched it to her chest anyway. "Thanks." Her teeth chattered the words.

"I think I can just catch Fritz." Penelope jetted away.

Nadine came back, her arm around her boyfriend Rawlings' waist. She stared at Hale's hands and the small jacket. "Just get Ella's coat. Where's it at, Ella? I'll get it." Did Nadine look slightly guilty because the Coxie was in charge of safety? Or did she think Ella was trying for attention? Or was she being nice? Ella was too cold to care. She was like the seafood in the freezer section of the grocery store: smelly, frozen, about to be consumed by someone with money.

"We don't need big coats where I'm from." Even her drawl sounded chilled. That's how the North got rid of Southern accents; they chilled them away.

Nadine flipped her long dark braid. "And you didn't think you'd need one? We're in Mass."

Moving up here had happened fast and it had been a hundred degrees when she'd walked out her front door. "It's on my to-do list." Ella wound her hair into her hand and rung it out, half hoping the drips would land on dry Nadine.

Rawlings frowned but said nothing. He probably thought she was a moron, too. Well, not everyone could skip grades.

"Lay off." Hale headed her back toward the boarding school, walking with his arm around her shoulders. "We'll get you a hot cider. Do you drink cider?"

What is cider? "Sure."

***

Cider was a mug of hot apple juice spiked with cloves and cinnamon. And it was yummy; it tasted like warm autumn.

She took a shower, and then wanted another mugful. The commons had a small kitchenette with drinks and snacks, and she refilled her cup with cold apple juice and took it back to her room. She took a sip. Hot apple cider with cinnamon sticks delivered by Hale had been better. She needed a coat to live in Massachusetts, and maybe a wetsuit.

Her stepmom would ignore an email, so she went online and called.

She got voicemail.

"It's Ella, I'll call back."

The Step often screened her calls for bill collectors, so Ella knew she wouldn't reach her on the first try. Ella picked at the edge of the mahogany desk while she waited, and then redialed.

"Hello?" Her stepmom had that impatient tone she always used when Ella bothered her. It wasn't mean, exactly; it was that tone that people used when someone imposed on them. And the oddest thing was, she could smell her cigarettes and hairspray, even though she wasn't there.

Ella got straight to the point. "I need a coat. Is there enough in the stipend to cover it?" The 'stipend' was what

they called the small inheritance she received from her mother.

"I have bills whether you're here or not."

"I know, but..." It had been really cold in the water, scary cold. Even the memory made her shiver.

"I didn't know you wouldn't be here to chip in, so you need to cover your half of the expenses." The Step was terrific at going on the offensive.

Ella had listened to a radio show back home where the DJ contacted cheaters. That's how she learned how to detect a cheat. Instead of defending themselves, cheats went on the offensive. *So what if I sent her flowers, you're never home.* And the wronged party took the bait every time. *But I had to work.*

Ella didn't take the bait and defended her choice to leave. "Okay. But is there enough for a coat?"

"We'll see. But I doubt it."

That meant no. But it gave the Step deniability if anyone called her on it. Prying money out of the Step was never easy. Winter would suck without a coat.

She signed off and went to bed on the problem. Wasn't there some custody law that said the Step had to buy her a coat? Probably not. Was the Step even legally in charge? Her stepdad was probably the real legal connection, and she wasn't in touch with him. She got the occasional email, but the thought of asking him after the way he'd left and stayed gone...she didn't need him. She'd be fine.

When the alarm went off, she didn't feel rested even though she'd exercised with the rowing and the dunking, so she should have slept well. Her mind rolled over her new circumstances. There was only one thing for it. Need

money? Get a job. No one else here worked, but that was their reality, not hers.

She contacted the email address that had sent her the travel itinerary. *I'm looking for a local job and hope you could advise about transportation into town.* The small town was only fifteen minutes or so by car, but a hilly fifteen minutes was too far to walk.

The scholarship advisor emailed right back. *There are shuttles on approved weekends. Outside jobs are discouraged given the rigors of Erskine Academy academics. There should be enough in your school account to cover sundries.*

Sundries? Who used words like that? The lady had to be ninety. *I can handle school and a job. I need outerwear.* And savings.

We'll look into it and advise.

That would have to do, because the odds of the girls in her dorm advising about a job were as likely as her getting invited to the next ball.

Another message popped up. *Do you have any special skills?*

Blending two smoothies at once, while handling a line, and tallying order totals faster than anyone working the register. *I worked in a smoothie shop. And I can sew.*

We'll get back to you.

***

Ms. Tooli wrapped up the chem lesson. "Anyone have anything to share about their fall senior projects?"

The room was silent. A silence unique to a class who hadn't done their homework; silence shaded with shame.

Ms. Tooli let out a huff of breath. "Past successes have

resulted in strong recognition for the top-tier teams."

Woo hoo. Strong recognition. *Hold me back.*

"And internships. This year, several are being offered."

Okay, now, rewind that. Internship sounded like a job, and she needed a job. Ella sat up straighter and raised her hand. "What kind of internship?"

Ms. Tooli looked pleased she'd spoken up. The teacher flipped through her tablet screens. "Top spot will get the option to work at the St. John Corporation in Las Vegas. It includes a monetary stipend and summer apartment."

Drake made rally arms. "Vegas, baby."

His girlfriend Kira joined him with the rally arms and whipped her red hair around. "Roll 'em, baby."

Drake held out imaginary dice. Kira blew on them. He rolled them.

Ella felt her eyebrows arch. The opportunities were so much better for these kids. Going back to Texas in May and living with her stepmom was the plan...but if there was another option...one that offered independence...Holy cow. Her day looked so much brighter. "I'd be interested in that."

Nadine turned around. "It's for the top spot." She was sitting by Rawlings, boy genius, so she probably thought she was a shoe-in. "Only the number one team will get it."

Ella had more to give, but she knew not to play her hand too soon. She stayed silent.

"Which St. John industry?" Nadine smiled at Rawlings. "Where would I be interning?"

"The St. John record label," Logan St. John said, causing several "Yays" and "Whoo hoos" from her classmates.

Yep, these were the kids she was now hanging out with;

their families gave out internships. And a record label? She wasn't the only one sitting up and taking an interest. Visions of pop stars were shining in her classmates' eyes. She needed to step up her efforts. So far, she'd essentially been stirring up her schoolwork with a spoon. She'd take it up to level three on the ninja blender. Ice crusher mode.

At the end of class, she turned to Hale. "Want to meet up and get going on the project?" She let drive and ambition color her voice.

His dark blue eyes showed interest. "Great Room at seven?"

"See you there."

***

When she got back to her dorm, there was a new trunk. Brown leather, gold metalwork, her initials scrolled on top.

Ella popped open the lid.

Chapter 8

The trunk contained several different coats, more than she'd ever owned, or considered needing. There was a lightweight one, a long one, a dressy one, a rain one, lined coats, coats that could hold tech gear, if she'd any, and a jogging coat. It was odd, must've been a cold weather state kind of thing. No one in south Texas had this many coats. When people said 'grab your coat' or 'grab your jacket,' they were talking about the same thing. There were also a number of different styles of hats, gloves, and scarves. She checked out the stitching, and the make of each item, and then laid them out on her bed, one atop the other.

The coats must be part of her allotment of uniforms. That took away one worry.

A second box contained good news from her scholarship advisor. *While a job in town would be frowned upon, there are some in-house options.*

Hmm. Relief edged through her. She'd take anything that didn't involve a chimney.

She dug into the box. It held silken threads of varying

weights and needles of varying sizes. It came with a note, a stack of white shirts, and a sheet of labels with student names on them. *While student apparel must be identical, monograms are allowed. Monogram the cuff, label the shirt, and drop it in the laundry bin. Fifty dollars per shirt.*

Cool. She'd told the liaison in her email she could sew, and she should have known these kids would like monograms. Who they came from was everything to them. And now she had a job. A well-paying one at that. Fifty dollars though? They were insane. Relief curved her lips. If she could get enough savings in place, she might not have to move in with the Step.

Happy days. She met up with Hale under the arched double-doorway of the Great Room, half bouncing.

A smile curved his lips in return. "You're in a good mood."

"I got a job." She told him half her good news, the job half, because rich boys didn't get excited about coats. She'd show Penelope the coats.

"Really?"

She told him the best part. "Fifty dollars, can you believe it?"

A supportive smile crossed his lips. "Is that good?"

"Yeah." It looked like rich boys didn't get excited about fifty bucks either. A fifty-cent raise had fists bumping at the food court. "Minimum wage is around ten dollars here."

His mouth twisted.

He had no clue. She'd educate him. "It's less than eight in Texas."

"An hour?"

"Yeah."

His face was blank as if he couldn't fathom that level of salary.

Kira came over, twining a strand of her red hair around her index finger. She wore the same uniform as the other girls, but the skirt was shorter on her tall frame. "Hey, Hale. What are you two talking about? Because I just heard the most interesting thing from Nadine." Kira was talking normal for her, but normal for her was full flirt mode. She didn't seem to care that Hale was talking to Ella or that Kira herself was dating Hale's friend Drake. If the guy was hot, Kira's voice lowered, and she focused on him. "Shayla was out after midnight with Bitsy, meeting some guys in town. Shayla just squeaked into our common room, and Bitsy was left in the hall." Kira stepped closer toward Hale. "Bitsy got caught by Mr. Findle. Nadine was all like, 'You can't cheat the system.' And she was right, because..." Kira's voice rose with her excitement, and she leaned in, almost touching Hale. "Mr. Findle tossed Bitsy out so fast she didn't even get to say goodbye." Kira's arm brushed Hale's and she didn't move away. "They're both always such sneaks; it's a surprise that Shayla didn't get caught."

Hale stepped back and took Ella's arm. "Sorry, Kira, we're working on our senior project." He tugged Ella's arm.

"No prob." Kira frowned, looking past them. "Is that Drake with Shayla? She'll have the full scoop." Kira made a shoveling motion and darted over to the windows by the tall bookshelves.

Hale led her toward the back of the room. "Catch you later."

Ella had almost missed curfew herself that time because she'd gone up to talk to him. It was only a curfew, and it

could have derailed all her plans, and his, because he'd walked her back. She'd have to be more careful. "Did you know about Bitsy getting expelled?"

"Everyone knows if you're out after midnight you get kicked out. Nothing can be done about it." He sat on the overstuffed blue couch. "I've been thinking about the fall project."

His hold on her arm drew her down too. She needed him to know she wanted this and was ready to work. "We need to do a teacher pleaser if we want a shot at the top."

His shoulders eased. "We do want a top spot. I'm not interested in the internship, but I need it for my college apps...especially, well, especially after last year." He unzipped his backpack and brought out a carafe and two mugs. The smell of hot chocolate hit the air, making her mouth water.

He handed her the mugs and poured.

Nice. "Thanks." Ella took a sip and waited for him to finish what he was saying. What did *last year* mean?

He didn't continue, just drank his drink.

It felt too intimate to push for an answer. "Let's brainstorm."

The Great Room's chairs were in random groupings. Most nooks were dark, but they were near a picture window overlooking the grounds.

Ella traced the E scrolled on the outside of the blue mug. All the school mugs had her initial on them, like they all were hers. *Thanks, Erskine.* "Yum."

"They make it with a combo of dark and milk chocolate." He grinned at her expression. "You like it."

"I do." Their cafeteria rocked. Comparing it to her public school cafeteria was like comparing a Michelin-starred

restaurant to a fast food dive on the wrong side of town.

"Better than the cider?"

"They're both good." Ella tapped his mug with hers like a toast. "This room is awesome; we're so lucky to have it."

"The whole building's awesome. My father went here, his father, my great-grandfather." Hale stopped, and blushed as if she'd think he was bragging.

He wasn't that kind of guy. She envied his sense of history. Her dad had left before she was even born. She'd have liked a picture. To know where he went to school would have been a bonus. "That's really cool. To maintain something...it's admirable." She looked around. "How about we do a mock-up of the Great Room?" They could do anything for their big senior project, but as she liked Ms. Tooli best, she wanted her as an advisor, and this was science-related enough to qualify.

Hale frowned and looked around. "I could make it to scale, run lights." His voice was cautious.

Excellent. Electricity was definitely science, and he sounded enthused, too. This could work. "I can do the upholstery." They'd hit on the right idea. She knew it and grinned big. "We actually could mock up the whole building, and decorate this one room. What do you think?"

Hale raised his hand into a high five and she slapped it, their palms warm from the drinks. His was rough and calloused. He had guy hands. Their glancing touch wasn't enough contact, but raising her hand again seemed too obvious. High five repeat wasn't a thing. Maybe she could make it a thing if she named it...high five echo, a high five do-over...

Hale kept his attention on her. Tension eased from his

expression. "Math, science, history. Total teacher-pleaser. Total A."

***

Ella yawned and leaned against the windowsill. It was too early to get up, with dawn cresting the horizon, but she couldn't sleep. Outside, five guys were headed down to the dock. It was the crew. They did this a few times a week. Sometimes she was awake enough to see them. Those were good mornings. She scooted her chemistry book aside so she could sit on top of her desk and watch.

They had a big test later today, and watching Hale go down there while she had her chemistry book behind her made her think of the day they first met and him having to split time between studying and rowing. It sparked an idea. She brushed her teeth, and then tied her hair up in a loose knot. After grabbing her new pea coat to go over a T-shirt and yoga pants, she headed down to the docks.

She paused in the door. All five guys were on rowing machines, their leg muscles bunched and their arms pulled. Their motions created a lot of noise for this morning hour. If the girls in her dorm could see this, they'd all be up early. Maybe not Penelope, she liked to sleep in, but the rest of them for sure.

The sight was enough to have her spin around and go, but Hale was closest to the door and he was the one she wanted to see. He paused to chug a blue drink from a sports bottle and waved her over. "What's up?"

She sank into crisscross about two feet from him and kept her voice low enough so the guys glancing their way wouldn't hear. "I thought I'd run through my chem notes.

And I saw y'all, and thought I could quiz you while you row."

His dark blue eyes went from his default serious to bright. "Yeah."

And so she did, flash card-style, for forty-five minutes. It almost inspired her to do a sit-up or something, but the most she could manage was a tall stretch when she stood to head back. The guys were slowing down their routine, and she knew they ended with a thirty-minute jog before hitting the showers. She headed to the door, her big book under her arm.

"Ella."

"Yeah?" She turned back.

"Thanks." Hale's voice was low, not flippant or fun, but dead on serious.

"You're welcome."

***

"High bun or low chignon?" Penelope stood in Ella's doorway, holding her pale hair high on her head with one hand and a sparkly red clip in the other.

"Low," Ella mumbled around a piece of thread she held in her mouth. She snipped off the end with a pair of scissors and smoothed her fingers over the initials. Lovely. Another shirt done. Another fifty bucks.

Penelope kicked back on her window seat. "Have you heard of those Escape Rooms?"

Ella shook her head. "Like a panic room?"

"No. Not security. An Escape Room is an entertainment venue, like near restaurants. You and your date get locked in until you can solve the puzzle and get freed." Penelope gave

a big sigh as if imagining the joy of being trapped with her date.

"Sounds interesting."

"Yeah." She grinned conspiratorially. "It's my senior project with Fritz. My idea. I can so see us being locked in. Together." She clasped her hands together and made the motion of struggling to make one let go of the other, and then dropped them in her lap. "Together," she whispered.

"That's pretty cool."

"Yeah. We were keeping it a secret, because it's such a hot idea, but by now everyone's so far into their fall projects they couldn't copy us if they wanted. Plus, I trust you."

That was nice, and there was always someone copying someone else at her old school. Penelope was wise to keep it a secret. "What's your theme?"

Penelope stuck out her tongue. "The election, of course. You know Fritz. But I was thinking, after the judging is done, I'll re-decorate for him and me." She wiggled her eyebrows. "As a romantic surprise. A Romantic Escape Room."

"If things are going well, why not?" Ella picked up a new shirt. This one belonged to Kira. She Googled Kira's full name on the school website. She knew Kira, but she didn't *know* Kira. Looking up a few facts gave her ideas. Kira had green eyes, red hair, and an interest in tennis. She picked through the green and white threads. "It's not just guys who want shirts done. This one is for Kira."

"That's really lovely." Penelope moved closer. "Will you do some of mine? I get so sick of uniforms and would love some pops of color, even if they're only on my cuff." A blush filled her cheeks. "I'd pay, of course."

"No. You're a friend. Bring them by anytime." She'd grown apart from her friends back home when her mom died. Her own fault. Not theirs. Now they just emailed. It was good to have a close friend again. "I'll do yours for free."

Penelope beamed. "Fine. Fine. But I want one done for Hale as a surprise. He can be so stuffy sometimes. He needs a pop of color." She sprang over to the window. "They're going down to practice. Go snag one of his shirts now."

"What?"

"He's a bit of a slob, you know. He'll have clothes all over his room until housekeeping picks up at the end of the week." She grinned even bigger. "It'll be such a shock when he sees his stuff messed with." She clapped. "I love it." Penelope peered into Ella's mirror. "You're right about the chignon. Thanks, Ella." She bounced out of the door.

Penelope was one of those girls it was difficult to be annoyed with. She'd never consider that she could run up to Hale's room and collect his laundry herself.

***

Ella peered into the boys' common room, which smelled like protein bars and the orange-scented spray the cleaners used.

Empty.

Not a surprise. The campus had loads of better hangout spots, with TV. The commons had couches and bookshelves and a fireplace, the same as the girls' commons. She snuck over to the door marked *Penworth* and slipped inside.

A faint trace of Hale's cologne hung in the air. Hale's covers hung half off his bed. A tie hung over the back of his desk chair. A jacket was thrown on his bedpost. And a white uniform shirt lay on the carpet half under the bed.

Bingo. She bent to get it.

A male voice sounded from the common area. "I will."

Hale.

She closed her hand over the collar.

"Why is it even on paper?" another voice said.

"Shove off," Hale said.

The other guy laughed, louder, which meant they were getting closer. She did not want to explain her position. It would spoil Penelope's surprise, and she'd look like a creeper. She dropped flat and scooted under the bed. Her feet kicked into stuff. Shoes? Boxes. There wasn't as much space as she thought. She wiggled and bent her knees to fit. *Go away.*

The door opened.

Okay. Get what you came for and go away.

"When—" That was the other guy talking.

"Seriously, get lost." Hale slammed the door.

Grab and go. Ella breathed in and out, fighting to keep quiet.

Hale wore sneakers. It was all she could see of him from this angle, sneakers and tracksuit bottoms. He toed a shoe off.

It tumbled across the room.

Oh. What was he doing?

He toed the other one loose and kicked it off. It banged into the opposite wall.

A rustle of clothes sounded, and a dark blue T-shirt dropped in front of her face.

He was stripping.

Chapter 9

Hale's clothes were coming off, and she was hiding under his bed. A squeak-gasp left her lips like a partier sucking on a helium birthday balloon.

Hale froze, and then he dropped down in push-up form and peered at her. His dark blond hair was brushed off his forehead. He frowned and then his eyes widened. "Tag?"

Could she get away with Hide-n-Seek? "It's not what it looks like."

He stood up and backed away.

She rolled out.

Hale backed up another step. "Is that my shirt?"

She was clutching his shirt to her chest tighter than he clutched the oars on the boat. She closed her eyes and cursed Penelope silently. "It's for a surprise.... for Penelope. Penelope asked me to get it." When she opened her eyes, all she could see was his bare chest. Cut and ripped like an elite athlete. Heat flushed her face. He thought she was a creepy stalker, and the sad fact was, it was worth the embarrassment to catch a view of him like this. She was such a perv.

"Will I get it back?" Hale nodded at the shirt.

"Yes."

"You sure? Some girls like to have a guy's shirt."

She sniffed it. "Your cologne is really nice."

His face stilled.

Why would he think she wanted to keep his shirt? Like a guitar pick thrown by a rock star to a fan. "Keep it like a trophy?"

"No, like to wear."

Weird. Nope. She liked pretty things. "You'll get it back."

"Okay." His tone held laughter now.

"Okay." She edged to the door.

"You could stay." His voice lowered.

She'd gotten really fond of that dark note in his voice. *Stay.* Ella's eyes widened and she dashed out.

***

In the study carrel, Ella thought Hale would bring up his strip show. But he didn't. They usually worked compatibly, most of the time in silence, until he would cave and poke her to talk.

He always gave in and talked first. Ten, nine, eight…

She twined wires around the battery, twisting them through the walls of their mock project. Their mock-up of the Great Room had worked so well, they'd gone ahead with the miniature of the whole school. Without electricity, though, it was just a model. They wanted it to be more. They wanted to win. Seven, six, five…

Hale was gluing down faux grass while she ran the wires. He stuck his fingers together and pulled them apart slowly

as the glue got on his hands. "The scale of this thing's epic."

She held in her giggle. She'd thought it would take longer for him to talk. The model *was* epic. They'd divided the school into six segments and had each on plywood so it'd fit out the door and into the gymnasium for the fall show.

Ella murmured, "Mmmhmm," and kept twining. The difference in working on a project with an unlimited budget was astounding. What she could have done growing up.

"Before you start on the clocks..." Hale could be surprisingly chatty, like his sister.

She was more focused. "We have to have the clocks." This school had big clocks at the top of each flight of stairs. Being on time was right up there with ethics. Everyone knew about the clocks. If the big M represented McDonalds, then the clocks represented Erskine's Academy. The clocks and the initial E. Hale had carved several of those for the structure.

Hale tapped the back of her hand with his gluey fingers. "We will. We will."

His phone buzzed. "Sorry." He turned away a bit. "Hello. Yes, of course...I'll go down there." He spoke a few more minutes, exchanging pleasantries in that *I'm being good* tone that meant he was talking to his parents. He hung up. "Mom wants me to run over to the hotel and make sure the staff are receiving all the arrangements for the Apple Ball, and introduce myself." He huffed out a sigh. "If you don't trust the party planner you've hired, then hire another one, right?"

"Right." She kept the irony out of her voice.

"If I have to go down there, Penelope does, too." Down there meant to the hotel a mile away, where the alumni

stayed on game days. They rode golf carts and limos up to the school.

Ella paused in stripping the wire. She had blue paint under her nails that matched the wall coverings. She'd painted those last night when Hale first had mentioned the Apple Ball. Now he was bringing it up again. Autumn alumni parties were only for some alumni, their children, and their guests. People came from all over the world for them. There were three this semester. One was the Pear Ball, which already had happened. She hadn't been invited.

Next was the Apple Ball, thrown by Hale's family. It marked the start of autumn and was supposed to be extra beautiful because they owned crystal companies. She hadn't received an invite to that one, either.

And, finally, the Pumpkin Ball was hosted by Rawlings' family, which owned high-end clothing stores and home building supply companies. How those two meshed, she didn't know. How she knew what her classmates' families' holding companies were was a product of being here. It was part of the conversation. Back home, she couldn't say what her friends' parents did for a living.

"My family started the Apple Ball forever ago; my grandparents really put it together. They're big on tradition."

And apples. It wasn't like she had a gown or a date...but still, they were sort of friends now.... was he about to invite her? Anticipation thrummed through her.

His face scrunched. "Fritz wants to make it political."

Ella made a noncommittal murmur. Fritz had pushed that agenda on Penelope earlier in the commons. He'd been all buddy-buddy with her. Penelope had eaten it up.

Penelope was Hale's sister...maybe he could help; he at least deserved a warning. "Fritz stopped by the dorm earlier. He asked Penelope if your family would introduce his dad at the ball. Let him give a small political speech. She said she'd try."

"Not happening." His face grew less tight, but more still and more serious. "He'd better leave Penelope out of it."

Ella got up and shook out her shoulders. She went over to the carafe in the corner and poured them both hot tea. She carried it back over. "He lacks a certain sincerity." She had stronger opinions, but Hale and Fritz were on the same rowing team; he probably didn't want his buddy Fritz blasted by the new girl who was just going off of a gut feeling. She sipped the Earl Grey. The cafeteria had used a distinctly floral blend for this batch. Not that she'd complain when someone else was making it and paying. They just had to place their orders and pick them up. Hale had unofficially become in charge of drinks. He always chose something different and brought them in. She'd miss this place next year, and the variety of flavors, and him.

"Thanks." Hale pointed to the river that ran through the sixth segment of their structure. "When we lost last week, Fritz shrugged. He rows but he doesn't care about crew. He's interested in Pen when he needs a favor. Doesn't notice her mooning over him the rest of the time."

Ella put the pliers down by the rows of stripped wires. "You know, you can just say no. No one wants to hear a speech at a ball."

He groaned. "It's Penelope's happiness....and it pisses me off because I know I'm going to agree if she pushes."

"But you don't agree."

"I'd never do anything that would hurt Penelope."

"Most brothers are meaner."

"We're twins."

"Even twins."

He shrugged. "She's not bad. She's frail and sweet, you know."

Penelope was sturdier than he thought, but Ella didn't protest. It'd be nice to have a sibling have your back. Hale was such a good guy. *Stop thinking about Hale.* "Why not get something, too? Ask him to row harder or give up on crew."

"Straits have rowed for the last four generations."

"And?"

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. "That's how things work."

Well, at least she didn't have that kind of weighted pressure holding her down. Her decisions were her own. "He's holding you back."

Hale's expression tightened. "We'll put in more hours. Rawlings will run new specs. We'll make up time."

"What kind of specs?"

"It's important to have all the information. Projected wind speed, water currents, crew member weight and position…"

"Hmm."

"You look impressed."

"I rather thought y'all put the oars in and pushed hard."

His posture eased and he laughed. "We do that, too."

***

Ella shoved a pillow behind her back. The year wasn't turning out as she'd thought. The shyness thing really had

lessened with practice, so it wasn't holding her back. There were loads of nice-looking guys here. Educated guys, smart guys, athletic guys. And despite all the rich kid clichés, she knew from some sidelong glances that they'd ask out the scholarship girl if she gave them any encouragement.

The problem was...she wanted Hale. He seemed taller than the other guys, more mature. His eyes held wisdom, and ambition, and caring. She brushed her fingertips over her lower lip. A kiss from him. It'd be sweet, like a rose petal across her lips. It would happen after a picnic by the lake. He'd walk her to her dorm room. Her hand in his. He'd brush her hair off her cheek. He'd pull her close, firmly but softly.

He'd touch his lips to hers. Her heart would sing.

She'd smile.

He'd smile.

He'd ask her out again right away. No waiting games. Then he'd linger before he departed, his fingers trailing her palms as he let go, or maybe a kiss on the back of her hand like the duke in her Regency novel...

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Trick or treat?" Penelope asked through the door.

"Treat."

Penelope burst in. She held two wrapped chocolate truffles in her palm. "Sea salt and caramel or dark chocolate?"

"Either."

Penelope tossed her the dark chocolate and unwrapped the wrapper on hers. She bit into the round candy. "Fritz is so perfect, so refined." She sighed as she said it. "I was thinking we should decorate coolers for the guys." She

finished off the candy and dusted off her hands before eyeing the end of the bed.

Refined didn't go with cooler, but okay. Ella curled her legs so Penelope would have room to plop down. "Like an ice chest? You know they have a fridge down in the boathouse stocked with sports drinks." Fritz chugged them until his lips turned blue at every practice. Drake somehow spilled one at every practice. Even Hale went after them like they were Hogwarts butterbeer.

"Yeah. But this would be for each of them. Individual ones. Obviously, I can't make Fritz a cooler; it'd be too much. Like I'm chasing him or something. But if all the girls were to make all the guys coolers...well, then it'd be like a good luck gesture. Go team. Rah, rah, St. Erskine's, right?"

"Right. Go blue."

Penelope squealed. "Good, because I've already ordered them and the paint. We'll get them in two days and have them ready to go for the weekend." She popped back up and waved toward the common room. "Come on."

Penelope tossed their candy wrappers in the trash on the way out. Hale was the only Penworth who trended toward messy.

A handful of girls sat around the couch. "Ella's in." Penelope snagged a notepad. "Now we have to go masculine and boaty, school crest, blue, of course, but I also want some romantic ideas...just in case we decide to use them." Penelope winked at her. "Or maybe I'll use them for something else."

She sounded coy, and Ella knew Penelope was thinking of her romantic Escape Room, but she hadn't shared her senior project with the other girls. So she didn't ask her outright if that was what the romantic ideas were for. The

girls all were talking and chatting at once, making the commons loud. When the common room was empty, she could hear the crackle of the fireplace logs. Now there was just noise. Ella took a step back toward her room. "I'll go on Pinterest to make a board." It was far from her usual designer dress and ball gown boards, but she'd seen a ton of crafts on there and knew they'd have great tips.

"Yeah. Yeah. Definitely. But brainstorm with us first." Penelope always pulled her into the group. It was sweet, really, but unnecessary. She wasn't a crowd kind of person.

"The river," Nadine said, "and flowers for romance. Red roses."

Kira made a cooing sound, and then gestured like she was popping a cork on a bottle. "Sports drinks for inside the cooler, and champagne or sparkling cider." Kira was the strongest extrovert of the girls. If there was a party, she wanted to be in the center of it.

Penelope scribbled the ideas into a notebook. "Good, good."

Good? How were they going to get champagne? What was something they could actually get? "Starry nights are romantic."

Penelope's face grew dreamy. "Excellent. More ideas, ladies."

***

Ella went down the steps toward the museum. She'd been meaning to come back here since the first day, but somehow other activities had taken over. She blew on the part of her hands not warmed by the cocoa cup and ducked under the *Do Not Cross* tape.

The room looked the same. Empty, tarp-covered. Cold.

She headed straight to the fireplace. "Hello, weird, unmovable structure. I've given you some thought. It's my week to solve mysteries, and you're up." She put her cup on the floor by the wall, leaned into the side of the fireplace and shoved with all her frustrations. There were three. Calls to the stepmom. Mr. Findle's boring history class. Nadine's niggling.

Nothing. It didn't move. Had she imagined the large gap?

She felt along the rough edge of the painted brick. There was one brick, more gray than white, really, about shoulder level. Hmm. Different than the rest. She stretched, aligned her shoulder with it, and pushed in hard.

The fireplace swung open, leaving a dark opening covered with spider webs.

Chapter 10

Ella used her phone's flashlight.

Creepy stairwell. Cobwebs. Spiders.

She was going in.

Making herself as small as possible to escape the filmy webs and their builders, she climbed the creaky wooden stairs. The steps were unevenly spaced and short for her size seven feet, but they held; no dramatic holes or cracks.

Ella blew out a breath when she got to the top. The air smelled like a storage room, musty, dusty, and unused. The room looked like a storage room, too. Old photos, black and white, hung on the walls, and old blueprints of the school. That would help with the senior project.

She moved closer and snapped shots with her phone. Her nose twitched and she fought against the sneeze. Next time she came here to hang out, she'd bring some of that orange cleaning spray the housekeeping staff used back at the main building and whip this room into shape.

The dust lay too heavy in the air to keep her there long, despite the fascinating old stuff, so she headed back to the

school. Mystery solved, there was an extra bounce in her steps as she took the stairs up to the school.

Hale stood at the side of the building, talking to Rawlings. "Ella." He waved her over.

Ella jogged over, rubbing her hands against her arms. Why were the guys out here chatting away? She had a shirt, a vest, and a cardigan and was cold. She should have brought a coat, even if no one else was wearing them yet. "Brrr."

"It's not that cold." Hale tugged on the side of her braid, and his jacket cuff rose enough so she could see he was wearing one of the shirts she'd monogrammed. He was so sweet.

He rubbed his thumb over the stitching. "Penelope gave me my gift. She said she told you my middle name was Aiden, but that the rest was decorative scroll. I know you better."

Sweet and perceptive. Stand closer.

Rawlings tilted his head. "Let me see." He examined Hale's monogram. There was a blue forward slash, a brown bump, and a blue wave.

Hale gave Rawlings two seconds with his cuff and jerked his hand away. "It's crew, yeah?"

Rawlings held out his own wrist. *NBR Nathaniel Braedon Rawlings.* She'd found his details in the student directory. Underneath was a blue bow. "The first seat on the boat, my seat, is the bow." He narrowed his eyes, and got out his phone to Google. "Penworth is British, the Brits call the forward slash a stroke."

Stroke was what they called the guy nearest the stern. Hale's spot.

"Clever." Hale touched her cheek. "Pen means hill, so

you did a little hill, and a wave for the river."

Hale's warm, calloused fingertips on her cheek made an excited rush flit under her skin. She fought to keep her eyes open.

Nadine came over. She slid her arm around Rawlings' waist like a lemur hanging on a choice tree branch. "What are you guys talking about?"

Rawlings held up his wrist so his *NBR* monogram was visible. "Ella's monograms. They're clever. Hidden clues, not just stitches."

The boy genius had excellent taste, except for his fondness for Nadine, but she was stunning and he was a guy.

Nadine's lips twisted, and then she tempered her expression into a more neutral one. "Yes, very nice." Her tone didn't sound admiring. "Enough about Ella. Why don't you and I go check out the caf? There's a new baker, and he's building a five-tier chocolate cake with apple accents." Nadine smiled a fake smile at Ella. "It's in honor of the annual Apple Ball that some of us get to attend."

Did guys not hear her digs? Did they not care because they always ragged on each other, and they thought this was the girl version of that? Or did they not care because Nadine was beautiful?

Probably that.

***

"As you see from this family tree, many people end up in careers similar to those of their forebears." Mr. Findle clicked the page-turner, and the smart board screen changed to yet another illustrious family. "Biology is destiny."

Ella held in her yawn. The history professor smelled like

coffee and cigarettes and was big on biographies and familial connections. Maybe some guy inherited the family restaurant, that wasn't DNA. He was learning the family trade. If biology was destiny, she'd end up working in an office like Mom had, and who knew what traits she'd inherited from her father's family—a fondness for Regency romance novels? Hah. Doubtful.

Nadine was sitting up straight in the first row, and nodding. "I really believe that, Mr. Findle."

Of course she did. Ella let her yawn come out. Nadine either found every class riveting or half her grade came from sucking on her Bs until they became pointed As.

"As you've seen from TV shows such as *Who Do You Think You Are?* extraordinary citizens often have extraordinary forebears." Mr. Findle's lecture went on for another twenty minutes, and then he went for the papers. Grades always came at the end. Mr. Findle plopped papers down in front of students, giving superior nods to those with good grades, and disapproving looks for the others. Like she cared about Napoleon. History was more than men and their wars.

"Ms. Aschen." He slid her C- in front of her and arched his eyebrows high.

Mr. Findle could get superior all he wanted. This C- kept her GPA right where she wanted it. Being average kept her out of trouble. Being average worked. She hadn't always thought that, but after pushing Mom to aim higher, and then having Mom get laid off by a jealous boss, her outlook had changed. Well, if Mom hadn't had to go on an interview to find a new job that day, she wouldn't have been involved in that wreck, and she'd still be here. Sure, plugging away at

an office job, but she'd be here. Average worked. She shouldn't have pushed for more.

***

The guys were in the boathouse using the exercise equipment and Ella sat in her usual spot by Hale. Hale pushed and pulled on the erg as she read out the homework questions. She wanted to ask why they called a rowing machine an 'erg,' but she kept on task.

"DNA." His answer came out a huff.

"Row," Fritz said. He served as the coxswain, which meant he sat at the back of the boat facing forward, kept the guys rowing in rhythm, and made certain they didn't run into any other boats. Even in practice, he sat apart from the guys and yelled out encouraging words like *row* and *stroke*. He did this so the guys would keep the same rhythm. She'd found out during the last session that he did not want to be called *Coxie,* like Nadine.

"Yo, I have the same exam," Logan St. John said. His family was sponsoring the fall senior project award internship. So he didn't need to win the internship, but again, these guys were all high achievers. "Let's hear the flashcards."

"Yeah. Louder." Drake stopped rowing to wave his arms at Fritz to quit. "Read them at the same pace as Fritz yelling *row* and *stroke* at us, and we'll be fine."

"Whatever." Fritz left his position at the front and went over to one of the pull-up bars to work out. He was the shortest and slimmest of the guys, but just as fit.

"Who…discovered…penicillin?" Ella stumbled over the rhythm at first, but then it wasn't hard. She'd been listening

to Fritz in the background for half an hour. She paced in front of the guys, which was easier than sitting and keeping the beat for some reason.

"I don't know, but I sure need some after last weekend." Drake's response drew snickers.

That was so not attractive.

"Fleming," Hale said.

"Good. His efforts were refined in what university's labs?"

"Oxford." That came from Rawlings. "I'm considering it."

Who considered England for school? No one at her last school. "Good. What moldy food was put on wounds in ancient times?" The question took a while using the rowing rhythm and cadence, but she kept it up.

"Bread," three of the guys spit out.

"Excellent." Ella kept walking along the front of the room, giving praise and asking questions. Coach used the same small path when he came in to lecture the guys. He'd only come in once during one of her homework reviews, and because the guys hadn't been slacking off on the workout, he'd let it go. "Scurvy is caused by a lack of…"

"Vitamin C. Sailors ate oranges and lemons to cure it." Rawlings gave the answer with the same rhythm that she used for the question.

"Very good." Ella gave him a thumbs up for getting the second part before she'd even asked.

Chatter came from outside the door. The girls were bringing down the good luck coolers.

Nadine rounded the corner first. She stared from Ella to Rawlings and frowned, and then she waved the girls in. "Good luck prezzies!"

Ella moved away from Nadine's boyfriend, and then kicked herself. She'd made herself look guilty when all they were doing was studying.

***

Ella had more free time than Hale. He had more friends to hang with, spent a ton of time studying, and he had rowing. She grew more and more into the project, reading online about models, ordering additional supplies to try out water features. Not that they needed to add stuff to it. They'd filled every spare corner of the workroom with supplies, and the place smelled like carved wood and paint. It was oddly fascinating how it was coming together, and it was stranger how well they worked together. Hale being super messy, and her putting things in order.

And despite all his obligations, he put in the time, too. He was here in the study carrel with her now. He wanted to succeed for college. She had multiple reasons for wanting this project to be a success.

She wanted to impress him. She had the vaguest dream of winning an internship and living away from the stepmom—and finally, honestly, she'd always been a bit obsessive about projects. Her Pinterest boards on dress designs featured the major fashion shows, her own sketches, and technologies like 3D printed fabric, and glow-in-the-dark fabric. She had a ton of them. An embarrassing number, really. Ask her what fabric they'd used most in medieval times and she could answer, and she had a board about it. Ask her how they made the wool for their uniforms and she could explain it. Right down to what they fed the sheep.

"I brought you peppermint tea." Hale placed it in front of her. "Do you like that?"

She'd never had it. Ella took a sip of the tea that had a hint of mint. "It's fine, thanks."

"Enough with the 'fine's.'" Hale took the mug away from her. "If you don't tell me what you want, how can I get it for you?" He clearly meant the question to be playful, but it came out hot.

Chapter 11

Ella's gratitude faded. Her weak explanations that she'd never had the variety of drinks that he had brought to the study carrel ebbed away. So did how, after a summer of serving smoothies to others, having a guy bring her a drink was a delight. The moment was charged, hot with double meaning. He'd give her what she wanted. She tried not to let her growing crush show, but some days he made it difficult.

Hale blinked, jerking back at whatever he saw in her eyes, whatever he felt himself, and went over to the project.

Ella didn't let him fully retreat. "How do you feel about the river?" Ella toyed with the super glue. She'd need his buy-in before the next step of their project because it meant tearing up part of the hill to put in pipes. Adding a working river feature that held moving water was a risk. They'd need to order a table strong enough, with locking wheels to move it from the room. She'd measured the doorway and knew the dimensions they'd need.

"I love the river."

She did, too. "I think we can make the river flow using the hill and some underground pipes." It was crazy to her, but they could order all the supplies they needed on the school's account.

"Hill and river...like my name?"

Her mouth quirked. "Yep. We're putting your stamp on it." She spun her laptop around and showed him the supplies she was thinking about ordering. "We can add water after it's in position or make some kind of lid. And if we run fish tank tubes from the faux river up to the school, we can get the faucets in the school to run and drain." She held her breath.

He didn't jump on the idea, nor did he immediately shoot it down. He moved forward and read the material. "That's rather brilliant."

"It's just a doll house, really. And we get to order all the supplies. So we have a huge advantage over other schools who do this kind of thing."

Hale tugged on her hair. "You underestimate yourself. Let's do it."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Penelope stood at the door to the study carrel. "The girls are sick of me gushing over Fritz. Can I hang with you and gush some more?"

"No." Hale frowned.

Ella gave him a *behave* look, though she'd been enjoying their alone time. "Of course."

"I'm out." Hale put down the pliers and headed to the door. "Want anything from the caf? Afternoon snacks should be out by now."

"No thanks." The guys from the team ate around the

clock and Hale was no exception. After seeing their workouts, she got how many calories they burned.

"I'm good." Penelope slid atop one of the tall stools. "Have you seen Fritz on the erg?"

Not really, he mostly sat and yelled *row*. "Sure."

"And those pull-ups." Penelope waved a hand in front of her face. She stopped and tilted her head, taking in the six different tables with piecemeal structures on top. "This is your senior project?" Her voice was now flat and serious. She sounded more like Hale.

"Yeah." Ella's tone came out cautious.

"Geez. I thought you and my brother were down here making out."

Heat hit her cheeks. "Nope. We've really been putting in the hours."

Penelope sighed. "You totally skunked my Escape Room with its six puzzles. There's no way I'm beating this." She brightened. "Well, Hale will get his A. He deserves it after last year."

Ella had to ask. "What happened last year?"

"You don't know?" Penelope looked away. "Sometimes I forget you haven't always been here. You fit in so well, you know."

"Thanks." Some parts of this place fit her perfectly, some still felt really foreign.

Penelope looked toward the door. "I'd tell you, but..." She waved at the room. "You're friends with my brother, too, so you should get the story from him."

Ergh... like she could ask him.

***

Hale paused before her desk. Ella blinked at him, admittedly having spaced out as Mr. Findle shared the branches of the British royal family who'd moved out of the United Kingdom.

"Is class over?" Her voice came out husky, like she'd been overusing it.

He quirked his mouth and scooped up her stuff. "Come on, I'll walk you to lunch."

It was Thai Tuesday. So they had their choice of Thai food cooked to order. But they had to place their orders in Thai. The same went for French Mondays, Italian Wednesdays, Chinese Thursdays, and her favorite, Spanish Fridays.

On the weekends, they had a buffet of international choices.

When the waiter brought her Pad Thai Chicken, Ella strangled out the words for *thanks* and *extra peanut sauce, please*. She'd been eating lunch with Penelope since week one, which meant she ate with Nadine, occasionally Kira, and sometimes the guys joined them. That made up her lunch table. It actually wasn't unlike her lunch table in Texas. She'd just been less invested in her group of friends after Mom. She shook away the thought. *Focus on now*. She spun the noodles on her fork and speared a bean sprout.

"*Al dente*," Nadine said to the waiter. She held up a spoonful of puffy, floppy over-cooked noodles. "*Pad Thai al dente. Por favor, monsieur.*"

Three languages, none of them Thai. She had to be joking.

The waiter wasn't having it. He shook his head.

"Fine. Thanks, this is precisely how I ordered it," Nadine said in the worst Thai of the table.

The waiter grinned and moved on. He either didn't catch her sarcasm or didn't care.

Penelope had ordered soup. She blew on the steam and took a bite. "Perfect." She wiped her mouth with her garnet-red napkin and then twined the end around her finger. "My gown for the Apple Ball is exactly this color."

Normally, if everyone wasn't invited, it would be rude to talk about a party. But the social order here was so rigid, and each ball grew more exclusive. So, for most students, there was no point of even hoping to go. The children of alumni were in. The children of the hosts were in. Their guests were in. No one else. They talked about it like it was a given. *The sky is blue. Only the select few go to the ball.*

Nadine took a bite of her soggy noodles. Her mouth twisted and she arched her eyebrows at Rawlings. He was scribbling on a notepad and ignoring everyone. Nadine hadn't received her invite yet, and Shayla had pointed it out in the commons last night. Not that Shayla was going, but she was sticking it to Nadine.

Ella would have said something to help, but with Nadine, it would just come out wrong.

Hale tapped his fingers on the mahogany tabletop right in front of Ella. "Come with our group to the Apple Ball."

Her insides lit up like a blender on high, until she processed what he was saying. *Our group.* Not *with me.* He was asking her to hang, the way they all lunched, not out on a date.

She poured the extra peanut sauce the waiter had dropped off over her dish and smeared it on top as she tried to think of what to say. No dress. No shoes. No way.

"Fun!" Penelope answered for her. "Invites go out later today."

Nadine's mouth curled in and she stared hard at Rawlings in expectation, kind of the way Hale was looking at Ella now.

She had to give him an answer. "I'll see."

Hale frowned and worked his mouth like he'd argue, and then nodded.

After dinner, Ella went online and pinned the gowns she'd wear if she could afford a gown to go, which she couldn't. She had a few hundred saved from sewing, but she'd need that after graduation. And calling her stepmom? Worse than useless. As tempting as it was to get a non-designer gown and go, there was no way. Even the cost of a trip to town was too much. And the nearest town only had fancy boutiques. She'd seen them on the drive in. She could order online, but that was a risk with a dress, and such a big expense. When her future was this uncertain, she just couldn't do it. She wanted to, but she couldn't. If Mom were still alive... no point in going there. If Mom had her back, she'd have a dress.

Designers were creating incredible art pieces with 3-D printers, and standout pieces that would glow in the dark. She'd go with a lighter red, almost pink, and layer the skirt like petals. And line the top with the tiniest fairy twinkle lights. With a full enough skirt, she could hide the battery packs in the petticoats. She'd illuminate the ball and spin around the dance floor in a blur of light.

She sketched what she'd wear, an iridescent, glow-in-the-dark sheer fabric over the ball gown inset with the lights. And she'd go full princess with the gown. Bell skirt, Juliet sleeves, tiara, and fitted waist...silk or chiffon or tulle. The glowing white lights over the red turned the dress pink. So

she toyed with colors in Photoshop, changing the dress from red to purple to orange...one day.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Ella went to her door. "Come on," Penelope said. "We all wait in the commons for the invites." Penelope giggled.

Rather cruel for the other girls, but okay. Ella took a seat on one of the overstuffed blue chairs. Most girls were pretending to study at the tables that lined the back of the room, like Nadine with her history book open.

A few others were primping, like Kira, gluing gems on her pinky nails, and Shayla, who was taking her waist-long hair out of large rollers.

"I finally got you in here. Wait until you see them." Penelope ran over to her, carrying a square jewelry box. The outside was dotted with crystals that formed tiny apples all over the lid of the black satin box. "Here's yours, Ella. How pretty did they come out?"

"Gorgeous. Thanks." Ella lifted the lid. Inside was a simple, heavy stock card on cream paper with the details of the ball. She traced the curved letters. Amazing. It wasn't possible for an average girl like her to go to something so spectacular, but it was lovely to be invited. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank Hale."

She would if he were standing here, asking her, but he wasn't.

Every girl in the commons crowded around her chair to look. It really was a spectacular piece of art.

"It's so nice," Nadine said to Penelope.

Shayla lifted it from her hands and looked it over. "You're so lucky."

A masculine throat cleared at the door. Drake and Fritz

stood there, both fair-haired, both wearing khakis and their school blazers. The guys carried jeweled invitation boxes. The tension in the room went up three notches.

Penelope sat on the arm of her chair, and she tensed.

Drake strode over to Kira and stopped three feet away. "Look alive, babe." He tossed the box to Kira, who had to dive to catch it. "It's you, babe."

Kira did a spin with the box over her head, and then rushed to hug her boyfriend.

Fritz came closer. He stopped in front of Shayla.

Shayla stretched her arm back and dropped Ella's invite back on her lap.

Fritz cleared his throat. "The Apple Ball is coming up." He sent a quick glance to Penelope. "My parents won't be there, because there won't be any political announcements, and they have to make the rounds this time of year. That's just how it is when you're a congressman. You have to visit your district and recruit votes. So it's just me. Shayla, will you be my date?"

Ella's heart broke for Penelope. He had to invite Shayla in front of Penelope to her own ball, the jerk.

"Yes." Shayla took the box from him and did a shimmy, making her long dark hair bounce.

***

Not wanting the drama of *No, you poor thing*, Ella kept quiet about the ball, as if she were going, until the last second, when Penelope popped her head into her room. "Want to ride with us? Hale wants to take a cart, but I said no way we're messing up our hair. It's the limo or nothing." The last part came out strangled when she spotted Ella in her PJs on

her window seat with a book. "You're not even dressed."

Penelope swished into the room, her garnet-red dress had a squared neck, and she'd pulled her hair into the low chignon. She'd used a matching lipstick, and her red lips dropped open. "You're not going? Everyone goes who's invited. Everyone." She put her hands to her lips and even her nails matched the dress. It was very matchy-matchy, but it worked. She matched from the tiny sprig of red apples tucked in the back of her hair to her garnet jewelry, to her red shoes. That much red on that pale a girl shouldn't have worked, but it did. "My parents are flying in from a buying trip in Murano, Italy. They're crossing the Atlantic to get here. You're across the lawn and you're not going?"

"No dress."

"We're friends. You could have borrowed."

Ella had several inches on Penelope in height and around. She arched her eyebrows.

Penelope giggled. "Okay, so maybe we'd have had to cut some seams, but really...to not go. It's the event of the season...well, one of them." She tilted her fair head at a confident angle. "The Pumpkin Ball is really good, too. With over-the-top invites. Delicious. But don't tell anyone I said that."

Everyone knew it. The October Pumpkin invite was as rare as an *A* in Mr. Findle's class, or getting your order right on French Mondays. The French chef served what he felt like cooking on any given day. Why they bothered ordering at all was the mystery. Mostly, they ate savory crepês and liked them.

"I can't believe you're not going. I really could have used you there. What with Fritz going with Shayla." Penelope

made a big frown as she said *Shayla.* "It's not like they're dating, I don't know why he's going with her." She shook off the expression with a determined grin. "We would've had fun."

"You'll have a great time."

"You suck for not going." Penelope checked her reflection in the vanity mirror and spun back to the door. "But I forgive you. Barely. I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

***

Ella rolled over to her side and turned the page. *The duke knelt on one knee. His buff breeches strained against his muscular thigh. "Be mine," he said lovingly. "Say you'll be my bride."*

Contessa tittered and covered her pink, rosebud lips with her fingertips. "Surely not, Your Grace, you've not the permission of my father."

"He'll not deny me. Not after the poker game. I hold the deeds to his lands. I ensured a win to gain your hand. With you, my love, the package will be complete. Without you, my love, I'll cast myself into the Thames, and..."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

11:30 p.m.

Penelope.

Ella put her book down and shoved herself into a seated position. "Come in."

Hale stood in her doorway, wearing a frown and a black tux and looking like a dream.

Chapter 12

Ella slapped the side of her book to make sure she hadn't fallen asleep.

"You weren't there." Hale untied his bowtie, leaving it hanging in black ribbons down his white shirt front.

"No gown."

Hale unbuttoned the top two buttons on his shirt, loosening his collar. "I know I don't date, but I wanted you to go with us." He sounded...disappointed?

"It's not an excuse." She curled up cross-legged and shoved her hair back, wishing she looked half as good as he did. "I had nothing to wear. I would've loved to see the ball. Was it gorgeous?"

He wasn't distracted by her question. "Why didn't you order a gown?"

"Is that in our tuition, too?" Interest peaked her voice along with a disappointed annoyance. Could she have gone?

Hale tilted his head. "Your family pays six-figure tuition but they won't get you a dress?"

Six figures. His words made her choke. "Mom's gone. I

have a little inheritance, but not that kind of money. I'm here on scholarship."

"What about your dad?"

She'd always hated that question. She pressed her lips together and toyed with the thought of one of her usual evasions, but she told him the truth instead. "I don't know him." That sounded better than, *I don't know who he is.*

Hale frowned harder and didn't meet her gaze. He stared out the window into the dark sky. What was he looking for out there? "I wish you could have been there. Or told me you weren't coming."

"Me, too."

"'Night." He left on that, not waiting on her own goodnight.

***

Ella went online to check in with her stepmom. The phone rang twice and the call dropped. Stupid Wi-Fi. She dialed a third time. "I got your message." The Step's message had said, "You need to call me" in a super-pleasant tone.

"I asked your stepdad about pushing for an increase on your stipend. Inflation, you know. We need the money now and a bulk payment upfront would tide us over nicely rather than these tiny monthly payments. You could even get that coat."

Did the Step think she was stupid? A bulk payment now meant no money later when she turned eighteen and could get her hands on the money herself. That money was all that stood between her and living off her cuff sewing income when she graduated. Money that would barely get her south to a state she could afford to live in when she had to cough up rent on her own. The money came from her mom's

family and had nothing to do with the steps. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"I can't get it without your signature. Just make a list of the things you need, something to justify the big expense for pulling a large amount from your trust."

No way. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"I think you're a minor. So you get an opinion on your life in May, and not until then. My roof, my rules."

"I'm not under your roof." Ella disconnected as the Step sputtered. Wow, she'd never talked back before. It was invigorating, and scary, all rolled up in one.

***

"We are so close to done." Hale adjusted the foyer lighting on the model, and then he looked around the study carrel. It appeared the same as usual. Boxed components along the walls. Bits and pieces on the worktables. The model of the campus in the middle. "Let's go for a boat ride." He grabbed their coats off the hook by the door.

"No way, you've seen me with the water." Ella lifted the grass over the switchboard. She wanted to test the circuits one more time.

"We're celebrating." Hale grabbed her arm. "It's good. It works. Come on."

"No." She protested all the way down to the boat.

"Yep." He lifted her and plopped her at the back of the boat, making it rock against the waves and the hull rub against the secure post.

Ella grabbed the sides with both hands.

He grinned. "Come on. I'll do the work. You steer." He took the oars and pushed from the dock. "I even stowed

some sports drinks in the cooler. Blue."

His grin did her in; she couldn't resist and felt herself nodding. She took hold of the cable that attached to the tiller—or was it the rudder?—the steering thing. "Got it."

"I'll supply the manpower. You keep us in the middle of the river. If we're drifting, just use that cable to steer us back to the middle. Simple."

There were currents, there was wind, and there was the distraction of his biceps. It wasn't simple. Ella straightened her headband and pulled her coat tighter around her legs. "Okay. Row." She used the balanced cadence she used in the boathouse for studying when she said it.

Hale laughed, so she kept up the words, using the rhythm they used to get the most out of practice. She let the words die off as they reached around the bend, and Hale stopped rowing, letting the boat drift along. It was beautiful here, the boarding school distant on the hill, a few remaining late blooming trees shedding early fall color.

"The river's my favorite place on campus, you know." Ella held her arms out and let her head drop back, enjoying the weight of her hair pulling her head down and the light breeze toying with the strands. "It's nothing like Galveston, where we'd go to the beach in the summers, but something about that briny sea smell that takes me back."

"What's your favorite beach memory?"

"The stars at night. Amazing. And just being there. The sand. The Gulf waves."

"Yeah. Love the shore, but the river's my favorite place, too. There's a small lake on our property in Connecticut. My best memories are there." Hale half-rose and climbed until he squeezed in beside her. The boat rocked like he'd

shaken it. He put his head back like she was doing and closed his eyes.

The sun glinted on his hair, catching the fair streaks. It reminded her of the day they'd met. He rolled his head left and looked at her with a lazy smile. It was the hottest, sexiest thing she'd ever seen, and he had no clue. "Tell me something about you," she said to shake up the moment.

Hale put his arms on either side of the boat and kicked his feet up.

She expected some tale of the scull beating another boat.

"In Connecticut…"

"Yes?"

He grinned at her impatience. "I was so mad at Penelope one summer. We were probably eight. And we were taking the paddleboats out. It was going to be an epic day. Picnic, fishing, perfect weather. And she was all stomachache and headache." He grinned, but his mouth twisted and his eyes were faraway with the memory. "I was so mad. I thought she was faking because of the fishing. But she got sicker and sicker."

Ella rubbed her arms. This wasn't sounding like a happy story. But Penelope was here and well.

"It was pneumonia. She went from running around the yard like a normal kid…" he snapped his fingers, "to in the hospital on oxygen."

Ella slipped her arm around his waist and gave him a small hug. It wasn't the words so much as the emotions behind them. A trace of the little boy he'd been shadowed the words. He'd been terrified. He didn't have to say it for her to know it.

"The doctor did rounds. Checked the chart. Ordered

meds. And that was it. Penelope was well. And I knew what I wanted to be. I wanted to be the guy to check the details on a chart and fix the problem. Not the guy watching."

Ella was leaning into him. She hadn't moved her arm.

He took his arm off the side of the boat and dropped it over her shoulders. "So there it is. One of my best and worst memories."

She pressed her lips together, so glad for him that his best and worst memory came out like that. Hers didn't. Hers was the policeman at the door while her stepdad had been off on the road. She'd been alone when they gave her the news about Mom. Mom had been off on an interview because Ella had pushed her to aim for a higher position. Ella rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. They'd been fine before that, better than fine. Why had she pushed?

"Hey, where'd you go?" Hale took her hand and squeezed. He let go and traced her cheek. "This is our favorite place. We should go with happy memories here."

Hot wet hit her cheek as the rain plopped down, absorbing into the boat. She flung her head back again. When had the white puffy clouds turned gray?

"We should go." Reluctance shaded his voice. A crack of thunder in the distance made him nod. He climbed back over to rowing position and grinned. "Storm's coming in fast. Steer us back."

More water plopped down on them, this rain a little thicker, a little colder, as it joined the mist being stirred up by the oars.

"Yo. Yo. Hey!" The wind caught part of the voice, but it was recognizable as Drake. He was out in another small boat waving his arms.

Hale rowed closer. When they reached them, Shayla sat up, wrapped in a big blanket, her dark hair rain-dampened, her grin sly.

"Hey, you guys," Drake said. "We're stuck. Let me climb over, and we can row back in." He held both boats and clambered on board before they agreed. The boat rocked worse now that the waves were picking up with the wind. Drake got rope and tied a connection between the two crafts. "The wind took our paddles. We were stranded."

"You threw the oars on purpose." Shayla's voice was playful and Drake gave her a *hush* look. She rolled her shoulders and shrugged.

"Uh, Shayla wanted to see what's around the bend. You know, Kira's not a fan of the river."

Kira, his girlfriend, rather liked the river. What was this, some sort of crew version of a flat tire on a date? Her gaze swung to Hale. Had they been on a date? There were no answers in the rain.

They got back to the dock. The guys helped them out, heaved the boats from the river, and flipped them on the dock. They tied them off and headed back to school.

"Race you." Drake took off.

Shayla laughed big and chased him.

Neither Hale nor she gave chase. The rain had slowed to those warm plops, the best kind to walk in. Thunder rumbled far in the distance.

Hale grabbed her hand, his big and rough, and twined his fingers with hers. They walked like that a moment and then he stopped and let go, proceeding as if he hadn't held her hand. His hands in his pockets appeared casual, but the blush on his cheeks and how he tilted his head away said something else.

***

Ella turned the page on her novel. *The roguish duke clasped Contessa's fingers and spread light kisses from her thumb to her pinky, and then started back, repeating the gesture as he repeated their marriage vows. He paused at the large princess-cut diamond on her ring finger. "I vow to love you until eternity winks out."* Ooh. Nice. Some guys know how to hold hands and commit. Ella flipped the page on her novel. *His aristocratic fingers grasped the top button on his beloved's chartreuse silk ball gown.* Now we're going somewhere. *As his fingers...*

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Go away. Reading here.

Penelope opened her door. "Let's get out of here."

Chapter 13

Ella arched her eyebrows at Penelope's pleading expression. "Where do you want to go?"

"Well…" Penelope drew the word out so it'd be enticing. "I'm doing a color wheel with my jewelry. Come on. I'll show you. I know you'll like it. You like design and color as much as I like jewelry."

Ella put her book down and slid her feet into her Oxfords. She followed Penelope into her room. A decorator's color wheel lay on her bed. The wheel of bright colors was magnetized and jewelry was stuck to it.

Penelope plucked a pair of deep red ruby earrings from the color wheel to show her. "When I go to get dressed, I know what colors complement, and what colors pop, and what colors should stay home."

"Good idea." Not just with jewelry, but her whole wardrobe. "I'll print one off the Internet and copy you." She looked at Penelope's school uniform. "Well, next year. It's not like we wear anything other than the light blue and black."

"Yeah, it really limits our jewelry to blues, greens, and oranges. Anyway, for my Pumpkin Ball gown, I can't decide if I should pop with blue sapphires or blend with orange garnets."

Ella looked at all the sparkling jewelry. "You have every color." She had more than one of every color.

"I know. But sometimes you just want something new. So I'm going to the jeweler in town to check it out."

"In town?" The idea was rather a rush. St. Erskine's was pure pampered luxury, but the idea of escaping the isolation was true temptation. "How does that work?" Every way into town she'd considered was a dead end. The bus didn't come out here. It was too far to walk. Students weren't allowed cars on campus, so she couldn't beg a lift.

"Car service app. Everyone does it. The trick is to get past the gate and not to get caught."

"Is that all?"

Penelope giggled. "I know you're in. Knock off that doubting expression, and come on."

***

Town was a small city center of posh stores. The walls looked solid, the windows had artistic displays, and the jewelry store had small windows with glass so thick she knew the place was pricey.

They went in, and the smell of vacuumed carpets and a hint of new paint greeted them. No bells tinkled or anything to announce their entrance, but a small thin man with a thin mustache and man-bun strolled toward them. He wore a gray suit with silver cufflinks and a silver nametag. *Gustav.*

Gustav did a quick sweep of their appearance, then gave

a small nod. He kept his hands clasped as he spoke to them. "What may I show you?"

Penelope glowed and spun in a circle. "Anything you have in orange or blue."

Gustav slipped behind the counter, assessing the contents with one finger stuck in the dimple of his cheek. "I might have just the thing." He left the room.

Penelope grinned. "They keep the really good stuff in the back." She moved over to the first case on the right. "I like to do a once-over of the room to see what jumps out at me, then go back to anything that sticks in my mind."

She had a strategy for jewelry shopping. Must be nice. With family involved in crystal, it made sense. Crystal glasses, crystal gems.

"Ooh, look at these pretty violet ones."

The little tag said *Iolite.* Ella Googled it. "It's from the Greek *ios,* meaning violet and *lithos* meaning stone." Not too expensive and very pretty.

"Iolite unlocks your true self." Gustav peeped around the wall. "Now, you have a good eye. That set is especially precious. I have Iolite specials in the back, too."

Uh huh. Ella's phone buzzed and she glanced down. It was Hale. *Hey, let's run through electric checks.*

Ella typed, *Can't. Busy.*

Penelope pointed to peach-colored pearls. "I'd love to try these on."

Gustav did a small bow and retreated.

Hale texted, *Why not? With who?*

She didn't say no to him often enough. She ignored his text.

Another text came through. *Penelope's not answering*

either. Are you out with my sister?

Why would you say that? No one goes out. We're not out. As soon as she hit *send* on the lie, she knew she'd oversold it.

"Let's move you to the princess chair." Gustav motioned to a curtained-off area. The royal purple curtains revealed oversized white throne chairs. Ella took her seat on the plush cushions. Should she warn Penelope about Hale?

Penelope clasped her hands together. "May we get a glass of that divine water you do infused with the lemon and cucumber?"

The water came along with tiny buttercream frosted white cakes, and small cups of hot tea. Sugar and caffeine, that would lead to great decisions.

They were fully sugared up before Gustav brought the silver tray lined with black velvet. The violet earrings sat atop a matching bracelet and necklace. "Now, not that price matters, but the earrings are $10,000."

For Iolite? No way.

Gustav put on reading glasses and polished each earring before handing them to Penelope. He held up an oversized, blown-up mirror in front of her so she could see.

Penelope put in the one, and tilted her head this way and that. "10k, not bad."

Gustav got a glint in his deep brown eyes. "Per. What with so many customers just buying the one as a third earring, we sell them in singlets. So, 20k for the pair, 30k for triplets."

Ella choked on her hot tea and covered her mouth. No way was she letting Penelope pay that for those. Her phone buzzed. Hale had texted. *I'm on my way. Pen's phone tells me where she is, but if you narrow it for me, it'll be faster.*

The dilemma. If her friend wasn't being taken for a

sugar-fueled sparkling ride, she'd lie. She'd warn Penelope, and they'd run. But Penelope now had on the Iolite bracelet and was doing a snake dance with her arms to catch the gems in the light. Ella shot him the information.

"I thought you wanted orange or blue?" Ella asked to slow down the shopping and get Penelope back on track.

Gustav gave her an approving nod. "Let me get the tray."

"Oh…" Penelope gushed over the new contenders. The orange gems were especially pretty and cheerful, winking up at them like an autumn hello.

Many trays later, a long black town car pulled up to the front of the store. Hale got out. It was so odd seeing him in the real world that she stared a moment. Sometimes, caught in the limited pool of school guys, guys appeared more than they were. Not Hale. He looked good in school, and he looked good out of school.

He came through the door.

Penelope looked up from her wrist. "Hale!"

Hale frowned at her. "We have to go. They're calling a special session."

Oh no. That meant all call to the auditorium. That meant roll call. Ella popped up. Anxiety hit her. The drive had taken 15-20 minutes, tops. Would they make it back?

"You're just saying that so I'll leave." Penelope's words were defiant, but she took out the earrings and placed them on the black velvet beside the necklace she hadn't been able to try on. She'd been pacing herself. She unclipped the bracelet with a reluctant twist of her mouth. She turned to Ella. "Did you tell Hale where I was?"

"No. Yes. Sort of." Why was Penelope quizzing her? They needed to rush.

"Leave her out of it." Hale strode to the door and opened it.

"Come back any time, or order by phone," Gustav called out.

"We didn't get dinner or ice cream or stop by the bakery or the shoe store. Ella's seen nothing of town." Penelope's tone had turned to wheedling.

"You know you can't be gone that long without someone noticing." Hale held open the back door of the car.

They got in and the car took off.

Hale relaxed into the black leather seat.

Penelope jabbed a finger at him. "I know you. Tell the truth. There is no special session being called." She crossed her arms over her chest. "There's no need to hurry back, is there?"

"Yeah. You know what happened to Bitsy. They're not playing with the rules, and you're not getting kicked out while I can help it."

Penelope rolled her eyes. "It was just a quick trip," she muttered now as the rebellion drained from her voice.

Relief hit Ella as they bickered. They'd make it back. There was no special session or roll call. Penelope hadn't overpaid for jewelry. And they were being dropped much closer than where they'd left from. This was the visitors' entrance to the docks. All's well that ends well.

Hale nodded at the boathouse. "We'll go in here. If anyone asks, we were at the boathouse."

Penelope rolled her eyes again. "No one's going to ask."

They trudged across the grounds, keeping an eye out for anyone, and shared a sigh of relief as they got to the sealed boards that made up the docks. They didn't see anyone until

they got to the steps of the school. Nadine and Kira were coming down, arm-in-arm.

"What are you three up to?" Nadine said.

Kira tilted her head. "And can we join?"

"Nothing. We were by the river," Ella said, in a rush. Crap, she was supposed to have said the boathouse. But they hadn't checked the boathouse, there could be a whole team meeting going on in there, and if they said *boathouse* everyone would know they were lying. And Nadine was the type of girl to make sure everyone knew they were lying. Somehow, some way. It was who she was.

Penelope giggled, which didn't help.

Hale just sped up.

They passed the other girls, whose expressions had gone from vague curiosity to narrow-eyed suspicion.

Penelope giggled again. "Can you believe 30k? Gustav was crazy."

"They came with buttercream cake. Don't forget that. He had to build in the price for the buttercream."

Penelope giggled again. "Yeah. He thought we were real buyers if he was bringing out the wedding cake tricks. That's usually reserved for couples searching for big diamonds." She touched her cheeks with her thumbs and wiggled her fingers. "You should have seen your face. Your eyes were so big. Like those round pale topaz earrings in that last case."

***

Ella turned from the window and opened her novel. *The duke pressed a kiss to the back of her neck. "My one. My only."*

Contessa released a deep longing sigh. "My forever. My duke."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Oh, Penelope. "I'm not going anywhere else tonight. I'm reading."

The door opened and the other Penworth twin slipped in. Hale. "What are you reading?"

Tell him and get mocked? No way. "Nothing." She dog-eared the page and shoved it under the window seat cushion.

"I'm sorry I was such a grump tonight."

Hale in her room. So weird. Ella smiled at him. "It's okay." She'd wanted to go. She'd happily spend all day window-shopping, when they broke for winter break, when it wouldn't get them kicked out. Somehow, being here had become more important than it should have. To get thrown out...the thought made worry twist inside her. If she left here, she'd be like the fruit they threw out every night at the smoothie shop.

Hale crossed over to join her and sat down, dwarfing the space. "No. It's not. I look out for Penelope, and you did the right thing telling me. I don't want you to think you didn't." His left hand tightened over a piece of paper, crumpling it.

"What's in your hands?"

He grinned big. His first grin of the night. He settled into the cushions and handed it over. "No one knows."

Ella smoothed out the paper. "Early Action Applicant. Harvard." She felt her eyebrows arch. Hale aimed high.

"I've sent it. I'll know in December; all my qualifications are there...but getting kicked out over busting curfew...well, you can imagine what that would do to my chances." He got up and paced. "Even if I get in, it would be contingent on graduating here. Right?"

Holy crap, that's aiming high. Ella crossed over and hugged

him, tight. She didn't know what to say. Life didn't always work out. It cut people off at the knees, but if anyone deserved it, he did. He worked hard. He was smart. He was a good guy. What could she say? "They'd be lucky to have you."

"Thanks." His words were muffled by her hair, and then he let her go. He still had that excited, worried look.

It wasn't like they'd kick out someone like him over one missed curfew. Would they? What had gone on before that had him so concerned? She could ask, but couldn't bear the thought of bringing him down.

***

Penelope tied up her hair with a blue clip that matched her cardigan. Crystals sparkled in the light. "Let me clip your hair up; it'd be so cute in a twist." They were the only two in the commons, as it was binge-TV-watching night downstairs.

"Sure." Ella continued surfing the Internet. She wanted to show Penelope a crystal-covered pumpkin she'd pinned. They could do a sequin-covered version for the pumpkin-decorating contest.

Penelope brushed out her hair. "Your curly hair is so pretty, but hard to work with sometimes." The hiss of a hairspray container sounded. "Product. Product. Product."

The heavy weight of her hair was off her neck.

"There. You look great. So great, that you'll be happy to know I got us invited to a thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"A poker game."

Ella frowned and a chill passed over her hands.

"Yeah. At the boathouse. With the guys. *Strip poker.*"

Chapter 14

Ella turned her head to Penelope and gave her a look that said, *You're crazy.* "Strip poker? No way."

Penelope clasped her hands together in a totally inappropriate prayer motion. "Please. Please. I promise. I've got the cutest new corset. Once I get my shirt off, we'll quit."

Ella gave her a bigger *You're crazy* look. Like the one she'd given the lady who'd brought her own kale to the smoothie shop. She'd wanted Ella to throw it in with her order, so she'd have a kale-banana smoothie bonanza. She hadn't known where that lady got the kale that rested in a Ziploc bag in her purse, or if it even was kale. Had it been kept cold, or even cleaned? No way.

"You don't understand. You're new."

"I'm not that new." Ella stuffed her hand into the snack bowl of trail mix and picked out the chocolate pieces.

Penelope's lips pouted. "Sorry. But it's true. You're a new and interesting woman." She pointed at her straight teeth. "I'm the kid they grew up with who had pink braces. Or worse, Hale's little sister. And Hale will mess them up if they mess with me."

It was irritating when people complained about family who had their backs. "It's not my game."

"You're only eating chocolate to stir up love emotions. Something you wouldn't have to do if you put yourself out there with guys." Penelope made a huffing noise. "Well, I'm doing it anyway. There's an ante and a river and a flop. I don't have to be from Texas to know how to play Hold 'em."

Ella closed her eyes. She really knew how to play, and she was really good at Texas Hold 'em. She didn't hate cards. Being hauled out like a trick pony to state the odds for her stepdad's friends had even been funny, 'til he left. *'Kiddo. Bring me a beer. And what are the odds Tony there has a straight?'* He'd been so upfront about it, his easygoing buddies simply had laughed. There'd been a lot of fun around when her mom was alive. But after she was gone and he remarried, and he and the Step had fought more and more...he took the easy way out by taking off. *'You're a girl, so you'll need a woman around. It'll be easier, kiddo, trust me.'* It hadn't been.

Penelope lingered at the door. "I'm going."

"Wait up." She gave in, just like she had on kale smoothie day, when she'd mixed up the green concoction for her customer.

Penelope squealed. She pulled off her gold bangle bracelets, and her earrings. She shoved them into Ella's hands. "Wear those and take them off one at a time. You won't be showing anything, I got your back. I won't let it go that far." She gestured to her white school blouse. "See. One or two hands, tops. Fritz will see my..." She unbuttoned the top two buttons on her shirt and pulled the side down so Ella could see her diamante-encrusted bra strap. "He'll

glimpse my Mr. Pearl, and see me in a whole new light."

While she couldn't shop high-end, having a thing for clothes meant Ella got the references. Mr. Pearl meant unattainably fancy corsets. This was going to end so badly. She pushed Penelope's jewelry back on her and Penelope's face fell.

Ella closed her eyes and sighed, and then opened them and raised three fingers. "Three conditions."

Penelope's eyes lit. "Name them."

She had to stack the odds. "We name a dealer so they shuffle every hand. I sit in the last position so I always bid last. And they don't shuffle between each hand."

"But they're going to insist we rotate and one deck per hand."

"Teen guys getting a shot at glimpsing the pearl? They'll do as you say."

***

And they did. There were six of them. She, Penelope, and Kira made up the girls; Drake, Fritz, and a guy from her English class, Matteo, made up the three guys.

Fritz put out appetizers from the fridge that usually only held sports drinks: literal *hors d'oeuvres* on toothpicks and white wine. They didn't know how to hold 'em like they did in Texas.

Ella took a sip of the apple cider-tasting wine and didn't ask how Family Values Fritz had gotten a hold of it. The guys were chugging from crystal glasses the way guys back home went after the keg with a funnel. She kept her sips small and her head in the game.

The boathouse wasn't the most romantic venue, with the

equipment on the wall, and all the exercise machines. But the place smelled like the orange cleaner they used at the school along with the mix of river water.

The pot held Penelope's cardigan.

The cards fell where they fell, but Ella could control a lot by noting the cards played. It was time for Penelope to lose her shirt. "Raise." Ella tossed in her size seven Oxford shoe.

Penelope giggled and began unbuttoning her shirt. Mr. Pearl was about to make an appearance.

Chapter 15

Hale stood in the doorway. He crossed his arms over his chest. "I heard there was a game going on. Guess my invite got lost in cyberspace."

Penelope hissed out a breath.

Hale looked from Penelope's fingers, which had buttoned her shirt back up to the top button, to her cardigan in the middle of the pot. His stance was wide, his face flushed, his frown unhidden. "Game over."

Fritz grumbled. "I've got a good hand."

"We're all in," Drake said.

Kira waved at him with her cards. "Come on, Hale, you can join in."

Hale pointed at Penelope. "You. Out."

He pointed at Ella. "You. Come with me."

Penelope crossed her arms over her fully covered chest and stomped from the room. Ella was happy to quit, but she didn't love his obey me tone. The duke in her novel used that tone with his servants. She rose on conflicting emotions and went over to him.

They stood on the docks in a silent standoff.

Kira came out next, and then Drake, who was eating a shrimp off a toothpick and chugging from his crystal glass. "Wait up, Kira, I'll go back with you." He toasted them in the doorway on his way after her.

Fritz and Matteo came out last. Fritz had a small backpack, and the sleeve of Penelope's cardigan hung out of the zipper. It didn't help Hale's mood.

The guys didn't bother with pleasantries.

Hale stared at her. "Raise? Are you kidding me?"

"I had it under control. I know poker." The words sounded lame, but she did. She could keep track of the cards played and knew how to hedge her bets. She rubbed her arms against the breeze.

"You 'know poker,' so you dragged my sister into a game? A game of strip poker? My sister?"

No. That wasn't how it went down. Penelope had invited her. "I had it handled."

"You left half your clothes in there." His eyes were angry. "It wasn't handled. And now they're being hauled back to the dorm like booty."

"Half my clothes." She gestured down at her school-uniform-clad body. Admittedly the one bare foot only covered in tights weakened her argument, but she went with it. She rubbed her toe over her ankle. "It was a shoe. Sure, I want it back, and I'd have won it soon enough."

"A shoe for now. Why were you even there?" He slipped his hands around her waist, under her cardigan. Their warmth went through her shirt and into her skin. "How much further would you have gone?"

It had morphed from being about his sister to being

about her. Ella rose to her tiptoes, again awkwardly balanced because of the one shoe, and poked him in the shoulder with a precise fingernail. "I'd have had that shoe back in two rounds. Exactly two rounds."

His angry gaze met hers. His chest rose and fell with his breathing. His eyes glinted, and he lowered his head.

His lips met hers.

The sensation was a shock. Heat. Little nerve endings she didn't know she had lit up the spot and tingled low throughout her body. His hands at her waist pulled her flush against him. His body was solid and she melted into him.

His mouth moved on hers, and her lips parted. He was in total control of the kiss, and all she could do was react. And not even that. The sensations flooded her like the waves in the river. But waves lit by electric fire.

It made no sense.

She was mad at him.

He touched her top lip with his tongue, just a glance, just enough to make hers follow, and the river waves became an ocean storm.

She gripped his shoulders and shoved closer. His hands tightened. He moved his mouth to her neck, and she gasped in his ear, sucking in a breath that gave no oxygen to her weak limbs.

Ella couldn't even pull back. She couldn't move. What the hell?

Hale cursed and pulled away from her.

He left her there. Like that. And strode back to the school.

For the first time since she'd known him, he didn't walk her to her dorm. Why was he so mad? Why had he kissed

her? Ella walked back, her fingertips pressed to her lips, the stone steps cold against her shoe-less foot.

Her tights were ripped and her foot was dirty and cold by the time she got back to the dorms. Penelope was pacing the girls' common room, and Ella walked right past her. She went to her bathroom, sat on the side of her tub, and stuck her foot under the warm, running water.

"Can you believe him?" Penelope spoke from behind her. "Fritz was looking at me differently; I just know it." She flung her arms out and motioned sticking a key in a lock. "Romantic Escape Room is a go. That's where he'll fall for me."

Ella pressed her fingertips to her lips again. They felt swollen; she felt different. She murmured noncommittally to Penelope and eased her out of the room. She turned the lock and looked in the mirror. Her eyes were bright and dilated, her cheeks flushed. She looked different.

Forever changed by a kiss from Hale Penworth.

***

Ella didn't get the chance to find out how Hale would be after the kiss because he avoided her. He avoided their lunch table and he avoided the project room—the project was admittedly done, but still...they needed to rehearse their description, and keep up the electrical tests. And he wasn't here.

All of it made her confused and furious and a little obsessive about him. To shake it off, she decided to find out about the other weirdness in her life. A billion people had told her St. Erskine Prep did not offer scholarships, but she had one. She'd thought about it before, but why rock the

boat? Now she wanted to rock the boat.

If she didn't have a scholarship, who had paid her tuition? Did her father work here? Her *real* father? The thought made her stomach twist. But there were only so many mysteries she could handle in her life, so she was going to poke around for answers to this one.

And was she really covered for the year? Would she be back in the spring to see Hale again in all her classes? Or was this fall all she got? She ran down to the office and scooted in to face the administrative desk. She walked straight up to the *Sign In* sheet with only a quick glance at the students waiting in chairs against the wall.

"Yes, dear, what is it?" The administrative assistant's voice was slightly impatient, kind of like her stepmom's, but less cold. She had a phone in one hand, a stack of papers in front of her, and a pen stuck in her gray-streaked brown hair. Opened on the desk was a square Tupperware container of tuna salad and a sprig of grapes. The admin was working through lunch, which explained her sharpness.

"I wanted to meet my liaison." Ella's voice came out firm. Her usually soft tones gone.

The admin ate a grape. "You mean the guidance counselor?"

"The tuition scholarship staff member who does the correspondence."

"I send out the account letters." The lady pulled her mouth into a grimace, put down the phone and pulled up the computer. "Name?"

Ella gave her the details.

The administrative assistant stopped clicking and pointed to the screen. "Ella Marie Aschen. Accounts paid in full, no concerns."

"Is my scholarship…" She was going to say allocated in portions per semester, was next semester really covered …but she was thinking how to form the words. There was something about an impatient expression that made the ability to put thoughts into words twice as hard.

"There are no scholarships here. If you need additional funds, you'll have to write home. But, like I said, your tuition is covered through graduation." Now her tone said, *Spoiled rich kid didn't know the right words for tuition and wanted a new toy.*

Her assumptions were wrong, but her words were a relief. Ella relaxed and then tensed as the incredible weirdness of it hit her. "I have a scholarship letter."

The administrative assistant sighed. "Let me see it."

It was in her room in Texas. "Well, I don't have it here."

"Look, you probably misread it. Balance due zero. Is there anything else I can do for you? Maybe you should talk to someone over in counseling."

"No, that's okay." Whenever someone didn't want to bother with her, they pawned her off on someone else who wouldn't want to bother.

As she walked out, the surreal suspicion hit her again, and wouldn't let go. Maybe…just maybe, it was her father who'd set this up for her.

When she got back, Hale stood in her doorway, holding her leather Oxford shoe in his right hand.

Chapter 16

It had been ages since the game, and he hadn't spoken to her. Ella walked around him and sat on her window seat. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared straight at him. He owed her an apology. Sort of.

He shut the door behind him and came into her room. A big no-no for the dorms. Boys could come by, but doors had to stay open. She started to call him on it, not that she ever had before, but she was annoyed with him. Then he looked at her with his tortured eyes. Eyes that said he'd been through some stuff, eyes that said he was trying to protect her. She was a sucker for those eyes. Everything hard in her melted. "Hale."

"I'm sorry about what happened."

"Hmm." Was he sorry about the kiss? Ella pressed her fingers to her lips. Her body zinged in trace memory that was just a fraction of the real thing.

He knelt in front of her. He put the shoe on the floor and covered her hands over her knees with both of his. "Don't be mad at me."

"I'm not." Her voice came out husky. She felt her face blush and wished it wouldn't, but his eyes, that expression. It was the one she couldn't resist. "I'll just say it. I'd never been kissed, and I rather thought it would be rose petals and pleasant feelings."

Hale dropped back on his heels, and his eyes widened, but his hands remained over hers.

Now that she'd said the most difficult part… "Instead, it was…" She looked up to get the words right. "Angry, and…hot. Electric. Like…"

Hale cupped her face with one hand and leaned in and kissed her. It was gentle and soft. And he did it again and again. Like the kiss she'd dreamed about, but over and over. The flares built inside her, making her breathing shallow, and her insides melt. The more he kissed her, the more they melted.

He pulled back. "Sorry."

"Why?" *More please.* Why was he sorry?

He retreated a step to the door. "It's not right. I don't date. So I shouldn't be kissing you. It's not fair."

"Why don't you date?" She waved her hand at him. "I know the surface reason. Tell me the real story. Spill it. What happened? Don't make me go all detective to get the answers from my suitemates. I want to hear it from you." She really was sick of mysteries, and now she was demanding answers.

He winced, but looked her straight in the eye. "I was dating a couple of girls last semester."

It seemed obvious and normal, but the words hit her like a punch…what was that? Jealousy?

"They got weird about it."

No. Duh. "I bet they did." She barely kept the snark from

her voice. "What happened?" She'd seen some revenge fights in her time. One girl gets everyone to shun the other girl. One girl keyed a guy's car. One girl trashed the other on social media. "Spill it, player."

Hale winced at the nickname. "The girls got competitive with each other." He brushed his hair off his forehead. "Honest to God, I don't even think it was about me by the end. It was more about one-upping the other. Anyway, I was getting closer to Gretchen, and Annalise..." He frowned. "Annalise snuck into the office. She changed all my grades to the highest they could go."

"You got As? So she didn't wreck your fancy car? Or cut up all your clothes with scissors." She sighed as if disappointed. "I expected more from these prep school girls."

Hale didn't smile. "I had to go before the honor board to prove I wasn't involved. Even in the end, when the girls went after each other, spewing out everything they'd done to get my attention, stuff I hadn't even known about, Mr. Findle said it was poor judgment on my part for associating with them. Even though I hadn't cheated, I got probation. I was one vote from being kicked out of here. Know what that would have done to my college applications? My family?"

Sympathy washed away any lingering jealousy. "That really sucks."

"Yeah."

A single tap sounded on her door.

Hale stiffened.

Penelope shouldered open the door and strode in. "Oh. Hi, Hale. Are you looking for me?" She carried a plate of sliced apples dipped in peanut butter and a glass of milk.

"I was returning Ella's shoe."

"Did you get my cardigan?"

"No. You shouldn't have been playing."

Penelope rolled her eyes and set the offering on Ella's desk.

Hale moved around her and left.

Penelope shut the door behind him. "He's such a butt."

Chapter 17

One mystery solved. Now, she wanted another solved. Ella got out her school-provided laptop and typed an email to her liaison. *My scholarship covers tuition for the year. Who funded it?* Ella held her breath. The liaison officer would now correct her use of the term *scholarship*. Maybe even tell her more info about who paid her bill.

The liaison wrote back right away. *Private donation. Be assured, scholarship funds are in place for your full school year.*

Penelope reached beside her and snagged an apple slice. She crunched into it.

Ella ignored her and continued typing. *I'd like to write a letter to thank them.*

The liaison wrote, *We don't have the names. It's a general fund to St. Erskine's.*

Liar. It was a weird shock to realize it fully, but the emailer was definitely a liar. "Penelope?"

Penelope was standing at her shoulder, blatantly reading her email and eating her apple snack. "Yep?" She tilted the plate to offer a slice to Ella.

Ella shook her head. "What do you know about computers?"

Penelope shrugged. "Some stuff. What do you need help with?" She wiped her fingers off on a cloth napkin. Ella hadn't seen a paper towel since she got here.

Ella pointed to her computer screen. "What can I tell about someone from their email?"

"Ooh, like on a dating website? You can tell if he's educated, assertive, attentive…"

"No, like…" Ella hesitated.

Penelope's eyes lit up. "Like a stalker or something? Let's start with their IP address. You know, if it's a load of computer details you want, I'd ask Rawlings. He'll totally hack it."

"No." The word came out sharper than she meant it to. She didn't want Nadine to know her business and Rawlings was her boyfriend. "Can we just keep it between us? I just have this…" She shrugged because she wasn't ready to voice her suspicions. It was odd that she was here at all. It was impossible that she got free stuff as soon as she needed it. It was just weird, and she needed to dig deeper. Deeper than she'd dug so far, which meant she had to do more than say, 'Thanks for the plane ticket. A new life for free sounds absolutely reasonable to me.'

"Okay, Rawlings is too judgy anyway. Start with the IP. IP addresses show your city. Let me drive." Ella hesitated and Penelope sat on the edge of her chair and pushed into her, taking half the seat. Ella got up. Penelope clicked on her message. "Which message? This one?"

Ella tapped on the screen over the liaison's email.

Tap. Tap. Tap. The knock came on her bedroom door.

Ella slammed the screen down, making Penelope squeak and snatch her fingers back.

Nadine stood on the threshold. She narrowed her eyes on the computer and then between them. She sat on the bed over the crest. "What are you two up to?"

"Nothing." Penelope voice pitched high and she twisted her lips. "What did you need?"

"You said we'd go down to the river after you brought Ella a snack." Nadine eyed the half-empty plate of apples. "You've done that."

"Yeah." Penelope twisted her lips. "Give me thirty minutes."

"Fine." Nadine went out, but she left the door open.

Ella hated that. She went and shut the door.

"See here in Outlook, click File, Properties, and this gobbledygook will tell you the name and IP address so we can get the city and Internet service provider." Penelope clicked on three more screens and cut and pasted. "Unless they are using an anonymous proxy server, which they wouldn't be."

The word *anonymous* appeared in row after row on the screen.

Penelope tapped on the word *anonymous*. Her blue eyes widened. "But they are... an anonymous proxy server. Hmmm. Now you know they're hiding something."

Chapter 18

It was almost time for the fall senior projects to go on display, and Ella had promised Penelope she'd do a run-through of her election-themed Escape Room. She'd rather be in her dorm, digging to find out more about her liaison, but she'd promised Penelope, and she took commitments seriously. Getting let down enough could have made her turn out like that, too, like someone who took the easy way out and let others down. Ella wanted to be someone who showed up.

She hurried to the back of the study carrel area. Penelope and Fritz had converted several rooms, and because they had taken small ones at the back, the ones with the poor Wi-Fi signal, no one cared.

"Finally! We've been running people through all morning." Penelope hooked her elbow and moved her to the front of the line. "You're next."

"Hey," a freshman boy protested, but shut up at the look Penelope gave him.

Penelope waved at Kira. "Give the line cotton candy and peanuts. Please and thank you."

Kira trotted over, carrying two American flag-covered buckets. One held blue cotton candy on white paper cones, and the other bags of peanuts. The freshman boy took one of each. The food appeased him, because he turned back to chatting with the others.

Ella made a quick check of the room.

Hale stood by Rawlings and Fritz. She wanted to be in Hale's group, not grouped in with students she didn't know. Was she leading them in? "This is a group thing, right?"

"No, and I'm timing you. So don't screw up." Penelope reached out and snatched a clump of fluff from one of the cones. She handed it to her and gave her a shove toward the door. "I need an accurate average on my results sheet."

"Okay." Ella absently bit the blue candy that dissolved into sugar as soon as it hit her tongue. She wiped her fingers on the side of her skirt and stepped into a closet. The door clicked closed behind her. The black walls told her nothing, but the laminated card in front of her had loads of information. The header read *The Strait Ticket*, followed by details about Fritz's father's campaign, more than she wanted to read, and a big box with a 'yes' and a 'no' on it. The text could have a clue, but knowing Fritz, it was a listing of his dad's agenda.

A marker hung from a cord taped to the top of the sign.

As if Fritz would be a part of something where his dad was dismissed with a no. Ella didn't read the info, just ticked yes.

The card folded in, as the marker served as a punch-device and the wall holding the ballot swung inward.

Red, white and blue election banners blocked her way. They were held in place by a combination lock. Easy. She

spun in the date of the election and went through to the next test. A mocked-up newspaper hung from a horizontal cord that stretched across the room. The newspaper served as a door. The headline read, *Scandal.*

Inset in the newspaper was a door handle, a lever, a knob, and a handle bar. Punny. The headline read scandal, so 'spin it' was the right answer. Ella reached for the knob and twisted.

Inside that door was a platform, and a pair of mannequins stood on top. The man was dressed in a blue suit, holding a carton of straws with one hand, and his other was straight out as if to shake. The female mannequin wore a red dress and was pushing a stroller with a baby doll in it. Shake the hand or kiss the baby.... Ella climbed the two steps on the platform. She kissed the baby while shaking the hand.

The platform jolted under her, lowering to the level of the floor. The floor was marked with three arrows. One pointed left, one right, and one straight. Three directions. Behind the arrows stood a tall clear tube filled with dollar bills. Campaigns needed money, but there was no way to get to the money. There was a small hole at the bottom, but it was too small to pull out any of the bills. Ella examined the tube for a clue.

Raise funds.

Ella jetted back to the male mannequin. She plucked a straw from the box, tore off the wrapper, and stuck it in the hole. Drawing in a deep breath, she blew hard.

The money shot to the top of the tube.

An arrow popped down, pointing for her to go right. That cost her time; she should have guessed right. Ella ran

down the hall. This room had three life-sized posters of the candidates. The posters lay flat on the floor.

One poster was titled *The Strait Way* in blue font over an image of Fritz's father. Mr. Ken Doll, Sr. The other two posters had similar layouts: middle-aged white men with catch phrases over their heads. The competitors' posters used fewer pixels in the printing so they looked cheaper and more amateur. That was the main difference between the posters. The main similarity was that each poster had a hole punched in the top.

Sure enough, there was a big hook on the wall. Selecting a candidate seemed obvious. Pick up a poster and hang it on the wall. But she'd already voted with the ballot.

Other candidates. Squash them. Ella stepped right on them, centering her foot on each of their faces.

That triggered a buzzer. A side door flew open, and Penelope stood there with a big grin. "Good job."

Satisfaction over solving the puzzles flitted through her and Ella went for the door. "That was fun."

Penelope gave her a high five. "Best time yet."

Kira was passing out peanuts to the line that had grown longer. Her hands were full, and she looked over her shoulder at them. She blew out a breath, and a strand of her red hair shifted, clearing her view. "No way."

Nadine stood beside her, but she wasn't handing out anything. She frowned and dropped her hands to her hips. "No way you beat Rawlings' score."

No one beat Rawlings' scores ever. *No one.* Ella froze.

Everyone in there turned to look at her. Rawlings, Hale, Fritz, the freshmen in line. The girls. A room full of blue and khaki curiosity.

Rawlings arched his eyebrows. "Did she?"

Her stomach twisted. She stared back and wanted to slink out. She hadn't thought. She had just gone through the maze. It was just a game. Sweat beaded her forehead.

Nadine rolled her eyes. "Penelope obviously told her all the tricks." She arched her dark eyebrows. "Gave you a few clues, did she?"

"No, I didn't." Penelope shook her head. "Really, I didn't."

"Uh. Huh." Nadine turned back to the others, mystery solved.

***

They went into the gym. Times like these showed her how small the school really was. Autumn senior projects lined the room. They ranged from extremely long papers printed on trifold poster boards, to more dynamic projects like Hale and Ella's.

Penelope and Fritz had made a trifold to show the elements of their Escape Room and the data they had about levels of difficulty. The judges had already gone through the Escape Room itself in the preceding hour.

Ella uncapped the bottled water as Mr. Findle and Ms. Tooli approached. Both were on the judging panel.

It was time. "They'll think we overdid it."

Hale shook his head. "They'll know we strove for perfection."

Her hand jerked, and Hale fitted his much larger, calloused hand over hers, helping her add water to the faux river. Rowing had made his hands rough, but in a good way. Ella flipped the switch.

The small boat, the only part of the representation with people, shot down the river. Ms. Tooli clapped. Mr. Findle stepped closer and narrowed his eyes.

Hale lifted the circuit panel and showed the judges the power, and the wiring and the plumbing. Everything worked.

Nerves bombarded her. She couldn't think of anything to say, though she knew everything about the project. So she let Hale do the talking. She'd worked hard on this, giving it her all. She wiped her hands on the sides of her skirt. Her whole body flushed with heat. It was so hot in the gym. Would the project be enough?

"Extraordinary detail," Ms. Tooli said. "The re-envisioned landscape with solar panels and windmills; keen demonstration of technology."

"Rare recognition of history," Mr. Findle said. "A thing not often recognized by your generation."

The math teacher walked up behind them, but said nothing.

She had to say something. Ella wet her lips and motioned to their small trifold poster behind them. "It's to scale. Here are our calculations."

The math teacher pressed his thin lips together and nodded with approval in his light brown eyes. The teachers moved on, giving no other indications of their score.

Most of the other teams broke apart after their evaluations. And, one at a time, they went around the room to check out the competition. Ella and Hale stayed with their project. There were too many working parts to give anyone a chance to mess with it.

The feedback was almost overwhelming. Everyone had

something to say, positive, envious, and some joking.

Drake gave them each a high-five.

Kira joined him. She held up two fingers dipped in metallic gold frosting. "They're gone; you can have some now." She'd baked cakes in the shape of Egyptian pyramids.

Drake's eyes lit up. "Finally. I want some of the chocolate one, too." He hooked his arm around her shoulders and dragged her toward the baked goods. Kira gave them a thumbs-up from there.

Penelope came by next. She elbowed Hale in a friendly gesture and he shoved her back the same way. Penelope eyed their project, which she'd already seen, and sighed. "They said our Escape Room concept was brilliant, but that we should have given both political parties equal representation." She lowered her voice. "I told Fritz that. Just showing his dad's campaign was one-sided."

Penelope's project had been their main competition. That meant they had a shot at the top spot. Ella drew in a breath. That just left Rawlings and Nadine. "How did Nadine's project go?"

"Rawlings hacked into the school finances and Nadine did a budget analysis showing waste and inefficiency. The math teacher and the IT teacher gushed." Penelope snickered. "The headmaster looked pissed."

As if hearing her name, Nadine came by. She stared hard at their model, her mouth tight.

Penelope took one look at Nadine's frown and scooted away.

"What did the judges say?" Nadine asked. "The people in the boat don't look like you two."

"They're not supposed to," Hale said.

"It would have been one way to go," Nadine said. "But I'm sure you did fine." She hurried off. Her steps usually were slower and more deliberate. She was actually rushing away.

"She thinks we've got this." Wonder touched Ella's voice.

"Yeah?" Hale bent to her ear. "I do, too." Delight and confidence came from his expression and posture.

She smiled up at him, feeling the thrill of success. "I think so, too."

Chapter 19

"Smell this." Kira held out the pumpkin filled with lilies to Nadine.

Nadine's lips tightened, but she gave the arrangement a small sniff. "Lovely."

Kira came over so Ella could enjoy some sniffing time, too. Ella really didn't have to take a whiff, because the lilies had such a strong fragrance, but she performed the motion to be polite. The stem had a ribbon attached to a card. Ella arched her eyebrows.

Kira nodded encouragingly. "Read it."

"Be my date, pumpkin." Ella read the card aloud using an exaggerated twang and a fake deep voice. The other girls sighed, or giggled, depending on their fondness for Westerns.

"You sound just like a cowboy," Shayla said.

Thanks?

"My baby asked, and I said yes." Kira made the rounds in the commons, having all the girls smell the arrangement. Then she placed it in the center of the mantle so the heat

from the fire could waft the fragrance throughout the room.

"It's amazing," Shayla said. "Best Pumpkin Ball invite yet."

Nadine's phone buzzed and her tight expression dropped away, and then returned and grew into a gloating smile. She strolled to her room, returning with a laptop. "Gather around. Gather. Gather." She sat in the center of the longest sofa and cued up a video. The video showed various famous people asking Nadine to the Pumpkin Ball, then a pumpkin flew across the screen and splattered all over them, until the last person appeared, a video of Rawlings asking her.

Nadine clapped. "Did you see the part with the soccer player, and how the soccer ball turned into a pumpkin that he squashed with a kick?" She touched the screen. "Wait, I'll back it up. No. There. No. That part's good, too. Let me just start it from the beginning. Let me get the light box so we can really see it." She hooked up her computer to the light box and projected the video onto the wall screen. The video played again.

They all clapped.

"Did you see the part where the leaves blew against the largest pumpkin?" Nadine scrolled through the screens. "Oh, let me just start it over. We can watch it again from the beginning. It's unbelievable, right?"

Penelope's mouth dropped and her gaze was blank on the magazine she held.

Ella went over to her. "You're going to the ball, right?" She kept her voice low in case she'd misunderstood some nuance of the 'most important ball of the season, only a select few were invited' situation.

"Yeah. My family and the Rawlings have been friends

forever. There's no way Hale and I wouldn't have been invited." She shrugged one of her shoulders under her fitted light blue blazer with the wide piping. "I'd just rather go with a date. You know. Someone refined. Someone like…"

"Fritz?"

Penelope's mouth curled up. "Yeah." She folded her magazine in half and shoved it between the cushion and the side of the chair. "He looks so good in a tux. And my gown is to die for. The palest pumpkin silk, with a big swath over my chest, a fitted waist, then a big swath of fabric at the hips. Then it falls to the floor. It looks like I have more curves than the river."

Fritz strolled into the commons.

Penelope fell quiet.

He came straight over with his practiced smile and stood by Penelope's chair.

Penelope shifted as if she didn't know if she should get up or stay there.

This was a first. Penelope was usually the hoverer. Fritz clasped his arms behind his back and rocked back on his heels. "I was speaking with my father, and he thinks it would be terrific if you do an informal introduction of him and his campaign at the Pumpkin Ball. As the last ball before the elections, the timing couldn't be better."

Penelope rose to her feet, and then walked over to the fireplace. She put her hand on the mantle beside Kira's invitation pumpkin, and one hand on her hip. The girls had practiced that move two nights ago because it thrust out their chests and their hips. "That is a good idea." She bit her lip. "But the balls are apolitical."

He motioned to the couch. "Of course. Of course. But

nothing's really apolitical. Everything's political. Let's take a seat."

Penelope dropped her pose and joined him.

Shayla clapped her hands together. "Do you even see me here?"

Fritz gave her a smile. "Of course. How are you doing, Shayla?"

Shayla huffed and flounced from the room.

Fritz gave her retreating figure a small glance. "You know I had to go to the Apple Ball with Shayla." He faced Penelope, almost touching her knees with his. "Shayla's family donates so much to my father's campaign. It was expected."

"Yeah." Penelope's voice was dry.

"It's just that if you and I go together, it'd be more like our families committing to the future. Together." He reached around to his back pocket and unfolded a laminated sheet. He'd written on the front in smudged dry erase marker *Pumpkin Ball Ballot, Check Yes or No.*

It was a prop from Penelope's election-themed Escape Room. Penelope had made the ballot. He'd cut it down to modify it.

He handed Penelope a marker. "Time to vote."

"Are we going together?" Penelope's eyes got big and she ticked 'yes' with a big checkmark. "Oooh. Yes. I'll talk to Dad about the intro thing."

They all were watching the byplay, most with happy smiles. Like Fritz or not, and Ella didn't, it was fun to see Penelope get what she wanted.

***

Ella leaned into the white column near the steps of the museum, the book she'd borrowed from the library hanging at her side. Her long wool coat kept her warm, though none of the other students walking around campus wore more than a short jacket. They were crazy. October was cold here.

"Hey, you." Hale wore the uniform khakis, the white shirt, and the blue blazer with ease. The tie around his neck had a loosened knot. He made the school uniform look extraordinary.

She gave Hale a smile.

He walked up and leaned on the same post and grinned down at her. The cold added a touch of pink to his tan cheeks. "Clever pumpkin invites are bombarding the campus. What are you doing down here?"

Happy for my friends, but there's only so many girls I want to see get flowers. "Reading."

"You're missing the spectacle."

"That's okay."

"Not your scene?"

She smiled. "Not my scene."

He reached for her palm and spread it flat, and then he withdrew a gold chain from his pocket. He flattened it across her palm, turning the chain so all the sparkling pieces faced up. Ella raised her palm closer to look at the tiny letters. It spelled out, *Pumpkin Ball, October 31, Hale & Ella.* Each word was offset by an orange gem.

The little fluttering of happiness started in her chest and tingled up to her cheeks.

Hale drew a question mark on her palm with the pad of his index finger.

The sensation raced from her palms up her arms and over

her shoulders and landed in her heart, making her shiver. She arched her eyebrows and opened her eyes big. She wanted to hear him say it.

Hale curled her fingers into his. "Be my date to the Pumpkin Ball?"

Her lips curved up with pleasure. "Yes."

Hale let go and scooped her close. He half hugged, half shook her while wearing a big grin. "Did I get it right, finding you alone? Or should we go up to the Great Room for a grand show?"

"You got it right." She laid the bracelet over her wrist and held it up so he could hook it.

It took four frowning tries with his deft hands turning clumsy to get it latched. Then he threaded his rough fingers through hers and pulled her down from the steps. "Walk with me."

They followed the path up the river. It was the way the students followed the boat races, lining the shore, and walking toward the finish line.

Ella held out her wrist to the light. "You don't date."

"You're nothing like the girls I dated last year."

"I'm not sure that's a compliment."

"It is."

They reached one of the high points on the river where she could see both downstream and where the river curved upstream. Beautiful spot.

"You're not hiding things from me like they did. You don't like me because another girl does." He paused and arched his eyebrows. A blush tinted his cheeks.

"I do like you."

***

The next day, Penelope stood in the doorway to Ella's bedroom. She tapped on the doorframe with the corner of a dress box. "Package for you, Ella." She grinned big. "Open it. Open it."

"You didn't?"

"No. No. Open it."

Ella got her blue-handled scissors and went to work on the packing tape. The interior was a long white box tied with a gold ribbon.

Inside was a ball gown. The gown she'd drawn and uploaded to Pinterest. Off the shoulder top with a drop waist, pale pumpkin chiffon skirt, flitted through with thin iridescent ribbons.

"Wow," Penelope said.

No way. "Turn off the light."

Penelope hit the light, and the gown glowed as the iridescent ribbons lit the darkened room. "It's gorgeous," Penelope said. "I'm so jealous." She hit the light back on and wore a pout. "My designer's amazing, but this dress is something else…it's art. You designed it, didn't you?"

Pleasure blushed her cheeks warm. "I did." But how had her sketch materialized? The weirdness messed with her delight. She hadn't shown her designs to anyone. Penelope had seen some. She shared a similar interest with jewelry. She had to have done this. "You really didn't?"

Penelope widened her eyes and shook her head. "I didn't. If I had, I'd admit it, and mine would be just as awesome." Penelope lifted a shoebox with matching slippers from the tissue paper. "You seriously are going to have to design a dress for me for the first spring ball. Promise me now and I'll control my envy and be happy for you. After all, I do

have the best date, Fritz. Can you believe it?"

"I promise," Ella mumbled. She flipped over the lid and tore the packing slip from the air-bill sleeve. "Let me catch up with you later, Penelope."

"But, how are you going to do your hair, and what about jewelry, and…"

Ella didn't wait for her to finish; she ran down to the administrator's office waving the packing slip. "I need to track this delivery. I need to know who paid for it."

The administrative assistant looked at the row of students who'd come in before her, shrugged, and took the piece of paper. She glanced out the window at a white van. "The courier's still out front. Go ask him."

Ella jetted to the door.

The admin held out the slip and frowned. "Wait."

Pausing, Ella looked back. "I'll miss him." She tried to keep the impatience from her voice.

"Hold your horses." The admin typed into the computer. "That's a school account on the shipper line."

"Whose?"

Chapter 20

The administrative assistant lifted her mug of coffee and aligned her mouth with the lipstick mark on the rim. "Nathaniel Rawlings." She took a drink. "The second. Nathaniel Rawlings the second."

Nathaniel Rawlings. Rawlings. Ella stood there, confusion swaying her like a customer who'd received the wrong drink. They'd ordered blueberry; why was their drink peach-colored? Nothing made sense. Nathaniel Rawlings. Nadine's boyfriend. Hale's best friend.

"Is there a problem with the shipment?"

Ella shook her head and left.

She went up to the boys' common room. Drake was the only one in there. "Have you seen Rawlings?"

"Great Room," Drake mumbled around a cheese puff.

She didn't stop to think or make a solid plan. She headed straight for the Great Room. Rawlings was in the corner with Nadine, his arm around her shoulders, like they were in the backseat of a convertible and all was right with the world.

Ella went straight up to them. "We need to talk."

"Excuse you, I'm hanging out with my boyfriend right now. I'll meet up with you later. Maybe." Nadine snuggled closer and clung to him the way chia seeds stuck under the blades of a blender.

"Not you." Ella's tone was as clipped as anyone's from up here in Mass. She didn't even recognize the sound of her own voice.

Rawlings looked at her with a calculating expression.

That's right, buddy. You know something is up. Busted. Ella pinched her lips and waved the packing slip at him. "Now. Or we can do this here, if you like."

Rawlings shook his head. "Excuse us for a minute, Nadine." He dropped his arm from around her, freeing her to leave. He gave Nadine a look that made her bug her eyes, pinch her lips and go away. Everything in Nadine's posture radiated fury.

Ella didn't care.

Rawlings assessed the remaining students. "Maybe not here." He rose and gestured down the hall.

Ella followed him, fuming as much as Nadine. No. More. They stopped at the stairwell by the big circular clock. The second hand hit the top of the hour. Four. "What the freak? Did you send me a dress? A dress I designed, that no one knows anything about?"

He narrowed his hazel eyes and touched a finger to the side of his jaw. "Why do you think *I* sent you a dress?"

"Hello, account number on the packing slip." She didn't reveal she'd had help with that.

Rawlings tilted his dark head. "Lazy of me, but you must admit, you hadn't shown particular detective prowess up to this point."

She seared him with her eyes, shooting him with the heat of a thousand Texas suns.

Rawlings held up his palms. "Whoa. You didn't have a dress for the last ball. You needed one for this ball."

That made no sense. She scrunched her face. "How did you know I'd be going? That I'd even get asked?" Her voice came out sharp.

"Hale's my bud. He wants you there."

"And you thought you'd help his poor date out?"

"Something like that."

Pride squashed her anger. "I can buy my own dress." She couldn't. "Take it back."

Rawlings tilted his head and his dark hair waved over his forehead, making him appear younger. "No."

"Do you like me or something?"

His face blanched pale, and he recoiled with more force than was called for. "Of course not." He steadied his expression. "I saw a problem for Hale, and I remedied it."

He was lying. She didn't know why, or exactly about what, but he was. "Liar." She turned and sprinted. He caught her at the start of the second flight of stairs and paced her through the boys' commons and to his room.

She went immediately to his laptop. The screen was locked. His desk drawer lay closed, his papers in order. Elaborate diagrams were pinned to his wall. She yanked open the desk drawer and dug: pens, random bits of computer, nothing useful.

Rawlings yawned and crossed his arms over his chest. But his foot was tapping the floor and he tensed when she threw his stuff around.

She thumped the back of the drawer, listening for a hollow.

It's what she'd done to her own desk at home, created a false back to keep her stuff out of the Step's nosey searches.

Rawlings slammed his hand on the edge, trying to shut it.

It pressed on her wrist, and she kicked him to make him let go and yanked out an envelope.

He grabbed for it. He had a foot on her and rowing strength, and he easily got it from her, but not before she glimpsed the return address. *DNA lab.*

That deflated her. Her shoulders sagged, and her brain spun with possibilities. "What's going on?"

His mouth pinched. "Guess we share one trait. Curiosity."

"Are we related?" Her voice came out young, and, embarrassingly, with a hopeful lining. She didn't have any blood relatives. None she knew of. She searched his face for a resemblance and saw nothing. Wavy dark hair. Hers curled. Hazel eyes. Hers were light blue. Square jaw. Hers was more pointed. Nothing, really.

"We're siblings. I have it planned. After graduation, we'll break the genetic link news. We're in a fishbowl here, and we don't need the drama."

"But how…" Her mind blanked with spinning, confused thoughts.

Voices filled the commons. Rawlings went to the door. "Trust me. I know this place. We'll be better off if we re-visit this later."

Re-visit it? Ella left, a full bag of mixed emotions inside her, tied up with enough anger at being manipulated to march her down to the bus stop, never to return. But more than she wanted that satisfaction, she wanted answers, and only one person had them. And he lived here. "Re-visit? We haven't visited it at all…we share a…?"

"Father."

The word was a punch of hope. All the air left her lungs.

Rawlings crossed his arms over his chest. "The ball's tomorrow, right? You're friends with Penelope, right?"

Why are we talking about Penelope? Why couldn't she follow his train of thought? This was one of the most important discussions of her life, and she was losing track of the conversation. "You know I am."

"How will her date, Fritz Strait, Strait Family Values, feel if this drama pops up during his election plea for votes?"

Like a scandal had erupted all over his shiny campaign. But it wasn't about the Penworths or the Straits. It was about her. Her and Rawlings. But Penelope was her friend, her best friend here. And Hale was her date. They were involved. They all were tied up in this together. "He'll throw a fit. Fritz would not like anyone taking the spotlight from his dad."

"Exactly."

"There's a million things I want to know."

"And I'll tell you, after the ball. We keep talking and Nadine will come find us. You know she will."

She would.

"Or Hale will come up here. I don't know about you, but I don't want to lie to him when he asks what we're talking about."

"Okay. After the ball. After the ball, we'll talk." It would give her time. Time to work this out in her own mind.

***

Ella woke up with a scream. She shoved off the hot covers and stumbled over to the window seat, away from the nightmare she had been having. She hadn't dreamed of

Mom's death in a while. These secrets were stressing her out. Crawling up, she placed her forehead on the cool glass. She'd get answers. Tomorrow. She could wait until after the ball, but no longer. And she wanted to talk to Hale about it. She wanted to know everything he knew about her father's family. She sucked in a breath and her gaze flashed to her laptop and its Internet connection. No. Not that way. Through people, not online B.S. She'd been telling herself that since she left Rawlings. Nathaniel Rawlings, Jr. Crap. She headed over to her desk and pulled up a search on the Rawlings family. Unfamiliar faces populated the screen. Business articles. Society articles. Rawlings was an only child.

Yep. The Internet got that wrong.

His family had clothing lines, high-end department stores, home goods investments. Their businesses went back to some of the first chain stores in America. Nathaniel Rawlings, Sr. lived with his wife, Diane, and their son Nathaniel Rawlings, Jr. A current attendee of the prestigious St. Erskine's Prep.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Ella closed the lid on her laptop. She moved away from it, feeling oddly guilty, and returned to the window seat. "Come in."

Penelope stood in the doorway, a sleep mask on top of her head, a yellow dressing gown over her PJs. She slid onto the window seat, facing Ella. "I heard you up."

"You couldn't sleep?"

"I heard you scream."

Ella worked her mouth. "Bad dream."

"What's going on with you?" Penelope looked out the

window. Some of the trees had been wrapped in twinkle lights in preparation for the upcoming weekend. The scene was beautiful on the outside, and full of turmoil on the inside. "Nadine said you practically tore Rawlings away from her."

Nadine would. "It wasn't like that."

"What's it like?"

It was too late for evasions. She was too vulnerable, the news too raw. She rubbed her eyes. "You know the gown, the stuff, the tuition?"

"Yeah?" Penelope sounded wary now.

"It's from him. Rawlings."

Penelope sucked in a gasp.

"Yeah. Nathaniel Rawlings, Jr. He thinks he's my brother."

"No!" Penelope curled her arms around her bent knees. "Could he be?"

"I guess?" Hers was a life of not knowing. Maybe he was her brother. She didn't know who her dad was.

"How? What? Why?"

"I don't know anything, I'm just here in the dark." She didn't try hiding her frustration.

"Screw that." Strong words coming from Penelope. "This is crazy."

"I know. I gave him a deadline. I need answers. After the ball."

Penelope's head dropped down and she nodded against her knees. "After the ball...all the alumni ...the attention... the news."

"Yeah." It would more than overshadow any speech given by Fritz's dad. It would have been an epic scandal at

her old school. At this school, with a family who made society news, it would be all anyone talked about.

Penelope pressed her fingertips into her cheekbones. "Great. Now if I tell you to wait, I'm being selfish. If I tell you to demand answers, I create a bunch of drama."

Ella sighed. "I'll wait. I'm not even supposed to say anything to anyone, I'm a dirty little secret."

Penelope shook her head. "Don't." Her face fell. "Hale?"

"He's Rawlings' best friend. He'll confront him, I know it."

"So, after the ball...is best for everybody?"

She was being selfish, too. She wanted her dance. She wanted her beautiful evening. "Yeah, and now I need you to wait, too. Sorry for putting you in this position." Ella tried to loosen the grip she had on her own hands. She'd clenched them so tightly together her knuckles were aching. "I just couldn't keep it in."

Penelope twisted her lips. "You need to tell Hale."

She wanted to tell Hale more than anyone. "I need one day. Besides, what's wrong with wanting a perfect memory from the ball, untouched by this?"

"I get it." Penelope shook her head. "I get it, okay? But I don't like it."

"Just 'til after the ball. I'll tell him tomorrow night. I promise."

"I still think it's a bad idea to wait. Maybe you could..."

Ella had made up her mind and needed to go with her decision. She yawned. "I'm sorry I stuck this on you, but I think I can sleep now that I have it off my chest." She rose and walked to the door, holding it open.

"Okay." Penelope left, not sounding convinced. "Tomorrow."

Chapter 21

The Pumpkin Ball was held at a hotel not a mile from campus where the alumni stayed when they came to see their kids or catch a game. The alumni. That meant her father. He was here. Here, but she couldn't see him as he hadn't come to the ball yet. Evidently 'hosting' the ball meant paying for it and making an appearance at the end. It didn't mean greeting all the guests and circulating all night like at a normal party.

Her heart jumped at the thought. She would see her father tonight. Maybe even meet him. *Don't think about that. Think about now. Enjoy the moment.*

Ella stood with the other guests on the dance floor. The ballroom had dark wood paneling, and it was decorated in white iridescent ribbons, orange pumpkins, and white twinkle lights. She traced the floor's parquet pattern with the toe of her satin shoe. She lifted her pale orange skirts a few inches with the movement. It was easier to concentrate on the small rather than get overwhelmed by the big picture of what was going on tonight.

"Let's throw some confetti on this already wonderful occasion." Ms. Tooli took the microphone from the DJ. She tapped on it, making a thumping sound reverberate from the speakers. "We have an early announcement for the winner of our fall St. Erskine senior projects. And those winners are here tonight."

The room dropped quiet at the last part of the sentence in a way it hadn't been all night. Hale moved closer to her and wrapped his hand around hers, stealing it from the voluminous folds of her skirt.

Ms. Tooli grinned big. "Hale Penworth and Ella Aschen." Orange, gold, and white confetti spilled from the ceiling, raining down on the guests. The students who knew them turned.

A flush of joy hit her. Hale's hand tightened on hers.

Penelope was grinning big and clapping. Fritz was beside her, frowning while clapping. Nadine, her mouth tight, clapped slower than Rawlings, who applauded harder than anyone. Then others came up to them, patting them on the back, shaking their hands. It was a rush. A rush of excitement and joy on top of a confusing night where she'd rather hide away from the room, because she felt so exposed. It was as if her childhood hopes were about to materialize while everyone she knew looked on. Perfect project. Perfect date.

Ms. Tooli gave a signal to the DJ. "Enjoy your night, everyone."

The lights dimmed. Strains of a slow dance ballad came on, piano mixed with emotional vocals. Couples stepped closer or shifted away from the dance floor. Hale put his hand on the small of her back and pulled her closer. He took her hand in his and stepped forward, propelling her into the

dance. "We won," he whispered. His pleasure colored his voice, and she smiled at him. "I knew it, but I didn't, you know?"

"I know."

He touched a finger to the dimple in her cheek. "You're happy."

The confetti had slowed, and he spun her into the turn. The magic of the moment and the dance quieted her mind and centered her focus on him. The worries, the crowd, even the winning rush left her; it was just Hale.

Hale in a tuxedo.

Her date.

Her Hale.

The first song melted into another, then jumped into a fast song that they finished with a laugh. Then he took her hands and pulled her from the dance floor. "Punch," he said, over the loud beat of the next song.

Ella nodded, sliding a clinging curl back into the jeweled clip of her up-do. Her hairclip, borrowed from Penelope, was her only bling besides her bracelet. The one he'd given her.

Hale brought her a cold crystal cup of orange sherbet punch, and she sipped the sweet creamy drink, and led him toward an empty grouping of tall-backed chairs. The dance floor was a swish of orange fabrics in an array of shades against black tuxedos. It was the perfect October dance.

"I admit I wondered what happens at your fancy parties."

Hale blinked. "Same as at any party, I suppose." He took a small dish of candies from the waiter, who was dressed all in black. Each candy was pumpkin-shaped, but in varying crystalized-sugar colors. He held a red one up to her lips. It

was strawberry. He ate one himself while staring at her mouth. He was cute. Small party, big party. Moments like this narrowed down to who her date was. Her date made this the perfect kind of ball, unbelievably perfect.

Ms. Tooli came over to them, interrupting the moment. "The judges had an easy time this year. Your project was simply outstanding."

"Thanks, Ms. Tooli," Hale said, grinning.

Nadine and Rawlings joined them. They were a handsome couple, but not one she understood. And she looked at them differently now that she knew Rawlings was her brother. "We got second," Rawlings said. "I've never received an academic second. Good job."

Hale bumped his fist.

Nadine's mouth pinched, the way it had when she'd first seen Ella's dress. The expression made her appear older, while something in Rawlings' expression made him look younger. So the couple together, while only a year apart, seemed to be at a greater gap than that. How long had they been dating? How'd they gotten together? Rawlings was her brother. Crazy.

"Your project was well done," Ms. Tooli said. "But Hale and Ella's was hands-down the winner. We're going to display their model as a permanent exhibit. Their exceptional work will be on show for all classes to see for years to come."

As kind as the teacher's words were, she had to notice the envy pouring off Nadine like water eating away at the bank. Why didn't teachers praise and punish more quietly?

"You kids have fun, but mind the midnight curfew." Ms. Tooli left them there in an awkward foursome.

Rawlings bumped his shoulder into Hale's in one of those guy-gestures to join him somewhere else. Hale raised his eyebrows at her and she nodded. He rose, took a handful of candies and put the dish on the small table behind her. He walked off with Rawlings, eating the candies from the side of his hand like they were peanuts.

Nadine took one of the chairs. She wore a dark-sienna fitted gown with a plunging neckline so she sat very straight to keep the top in place. She gave a laugh-with-me laugh, but her eyes were hard. "You're barely pulling a C. Guess you were lucky to pull Hale for your project."

It was a celebratory night, and Ella just wasn't feeling in the mood to be stepped on. Not when Nadine had no reason to stir it up. Why couldn't she enjoy this nice evening? "You were lucky to get Rawlings."

Nadine stiffened. "We made it very clear where his hacking and my analysis of the financial data ended and began."

"And Hale and I worked together in a joint effort."

"I'm not saying you didn't."

Nadine set her crystal punch cup on a side table. The orange sherbet foamed over the side. She stared hard at the guys who stood over by one of the arched windows, talking. "You act like you're with Hale, but I think he's your cover to get close to Rawlings. It's Rawlings you really like. Given half a chance, you'd dump Hale for him. Wouldn't you? You don't even care what the drama will cost anyone else."

No. Ew. Nadine was so wrong. "Drama?" Heat flushed Ella's face. That part was true. There was drama, and it did have to do with Rawlings. Her heart raced and she tried to catch Hale's eyes. She needed to talk to him.

"Penelope and Fritz look so happy."

Ella swung her gaze to the dance floor. A slow ballad had come on, and Fritz and Penelope were waltzing amidst the other couples. "I'm not following." Nadine spewed jealous remarks and then commented on Penelope and Fritz. She made no sense.

"You act like I can't see you're dying to cheat behind my back."

Relief hit her. Rawlings hadn't told Nadine about being related to her. Good. She didn't want this girl knowing anything about her. "I'm not, and I wouldn't do something like that."

"Penelope thinks you're so great. I know better. Leave. Or I won't stay silent."

Ella gaped at her. Insulted. Weirded out. Nadine had taken her snide insults to a whole new level. This was blatant aggression fueled by paranoia. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm not into your boyfriend."

"Then why is he computer stalking you? Why is he wearing that stupid shirt you embroidered all the time?"

Ella opened and closed her mouth. She actually had answers, but she wouldn't share them. Not with Nadine.

Fritz and Penelope met up with the guys by the window and Penelope pulled Hale onto the dance floor, laughing.

Rawlings watched, making no move to return to Nadine's side. Ella couldn't help herself. "See ya." She went over to Rawlings. "Want to dance? We can cut in on Hale and Penelope." She did it to piss off Nadine. She couldn't help it. She did want to get to know Rawlings better, but that wasn't her motive right here right now.

Rawlings swept her onto the dance floor. The moment

they were dancing, her stupid motive for asking went out the window. This was her brother. A tie to something. This was special. Fun.

"Ella." Ms. Tooli interrupted their dance, wearing a big frown with her conservative gray gown. "May I have a word with you?"

Chapter 22

"I'm going to need to speak with Mr. Penworth, too." Ms. Tooli rarely used their last names. This wasn't good.

"He's dancing with Penelope." Ella searched the crowd for Hale and waved to him.

Hale joined them, his arm hooked in Penelope's. They were both laughing. Penelope looked between her and Ms. Tooli, her eyebrows arched.

"I need to speak with you and Ella," Ms. Tooli said to Hale.

Both of them. It had to be about the project. Was she going to take back their number one score? Ella's insides tightened. *Stop.* A teacher's frown didn't necessarily mean the end of the world. Maybe someone had spiked the punch, maybe someone had stocked the bathroom with off-label toilet tissue…

Ms. Tooli pointed to the exit. "In private. We should head back to the school."

No. Nathaniel Rawlings, Sr. was putting in an appearance tonight. She'd see him. Meet him. Sweat beaded her forehead.

No. Ella tried to think of a way to explain. But what could she say? She caught Rawlings' gaze.

His mouth twisted in sympathy as if he understood her panic.

With no other choice, she followed the teacher and Hale to the exit. Rawlings came along, trailed by Penelope.

"To clarify…" Ms. Tooli glanced at Rawlings, but didn't ask him to leave. She faced Hale and Ella. "Some concerns have been brought to the board's attention regarding your work." Her mouth pulled down. "We can see how Hale, who excels, could have performed to that level. We can see how he'd be part of such a creation. However, it's been said that Ella may not have done her part. Given your academic standing, just above average, some of your teachers see merit in the accusation."

Ella jerked back. "I did my part."

Hale's jaw tightened. "There is no question. She did."

"They just don't see how someone who performs at Ella's level could have pulled off half of that project. I'm afraid this will go under review. We'd like to address this as soon as possible."

"Now?" The word came out strangled. Her gaze went to the opposite side of the room. The hosts or benefactors hadn't arrived yet…the Rawlings family wasn't here. Her father wasn't here. Her fists clenched.

"Students under formal notice don't attend events. But if Mr. Findle and I can come to a speedy agreement…" Ms. Tooli gazed upward in total doubt, "then this issue may be resolved quickly, and this evening can resume, or you'll be asked to leave."

Leave. Leave? Not the ball…but… Clarify, please. "Leave?" Ella's voice came out weak.

"Leave campus." Ms. Tooli spoke in the tones teachers used when they expected an argument and they weren't having it. Even though this was her life. It was like all the clichés: a shock of cold water, a security blanket being ripped away, her world spinning off its axis.

Rawlings moved in closer. "I'll be their student representative."

One corner of Hale's mouth twisted down. "No need, buddy. We did nothing wrong."

"Take advantage of all your rights." Ms. Tooli waved to Mr. Findle, who wore a brown formal suit and appeared all too eager to leave the ball.

Penelope had her hand over her mouth and her eyes were wide. She followed them like she was on autopilot.

Fritz caught up to them as they were going through the double doors. They really were leaving, heading back to the school. Penelope dug through the garland draping the exit and caught one of the miniature pumpkins in her hand.

"What's going on?" Fritz asked.

"This doesn't concern you, Mr. Strait. Please resume your attendance at the school function," Mr. Findle said.

"Come on." Fritz took Penelope's arm as if to pull her back to the dance.

Penelope shook her head. "I'm going with my brother."

"You haven't given your speech, about your family supporting my father. You need to introduce him when the alumni come out."

"I'm sorry." Penelope pulled away. "I've got to go. Something's come up."

"Yeah," Rawlings said. "Tell Nadine for me, will you?"

Fritz crossed his arms over his chest but gave a sharp nod.

As he turned, he wore a smooth smile as if his date hadn't just abandoned him, and as if he hadn't just abandoned her.

The cold night air was a shock after the warmth of the ballroom, and they loaded into one of the limos that had carried them over to the hotel to make the short trip back.

"I can't believe this is happening," Penelope said as they pulled to a stop near the gym entrance and got out. Penelope moved closer to Hale in a protective gesture. "It's ridiculous. These accusations are absolutely ridiculous. And to come in the middle of a ball…"

"This is not helping, Ms. Penworth. Please return to the event or the girls' dorms."

Penelope shook her head. "I'm one of their witnesses. I saw them build the model."

Mr. Findle breathed out hard through his nose. "You have the right to serve as a witness. But I certainly believe Ms. Tooli and I can come to a consensus without student sibling input muddying the waters." Mr. Findle was basically saying Penelope's input wouldn't count. They reached the gym. Mr. Findle flipped a switch on the side wall and the gym lit up.

Ella rubbed her arms.

The gym was a cavernous room now that it had emptied of all the people except the six of them. The project banners sagged as tape gave away; a few had been disassembled. They walked to their model, which appeared professional in comparison. Really professional. All the fine details they'd spent so much time on now seemed like accusatory pointing fingers when compared to the crap poster projects around them. Penelope's had been their true competition. Rawlings' too. No one else came close.

Ella looked around as if she could see their accuser. "Who said we cheated?" Even the word tasted bitter.

"It does not matter," Mr. Findle said.

"It matters to me." Ella tried not to snap. Snapping at the teacher would not win her any good citizen points, and she needed those points right now.

"All students have a right to bring suspicions to a teacher's attention," Ms. Tooli said.

"Beyond a right, it's a duty." Mr. Findle pulled two folding chairs over. The teachers took seats and left them standing there by the model.

Rawlings stepped forward. "As their student representative, I come before you with the irrevocable truth. Ella and Hale did not cheat. As students..."

He went on while Ella's mind grew fuzzy and she only caught some of his words. What would this do to her grades? Would her credits transfer if she were kicked out for cheating? Where would she go? Each question made her throat drier and her stomach hurt.

Rawlings lifted the model's window drapes. "Ella sews. These were sewn. They match the curtains in the Great Room exactly." He bent to the model. "I hadn't seen it all. The work is excellent." His eyes narrowed, and he lifted the panel that held the plumbing and tubing and began putting the project through all the paces: water, electricity... "It's really very clever." His voice died off as he followed the wires with his hands and lifted other portions of the structure. He got a focused expression as he delved into the mechanics of their project.

Penelope took over where he left off. "I personally went down to find my brother a number of times and he was

working on the project. Hale always has had an interest in science, and you can see that through all the energy displays."

"Hale's input is not in doubt," Ms. Tooli said. "Anything to say, Ella?"

Ella stared straight at her and remained mute. They'd believe what they wanted to believe. She'd spent weeks on that project, countless hours with and without Hale; no one person could have done it. Who had accused her? Her throat tightened. She wanted to scream her outrage, but had the feeling that anything she said would be used against her.

"I'm saying Ella did her part," Hale said.

"Me, too," Penelope said. "I saw her every time I went down there. She was there, too."

Rawlings continued to tinker. "It's better than my project." He sounded really surprised.

"Are you dating Ella?" Mr. Findle crossed his arms over his chest.

"What does that matter?" Hale asked, frustration evident in his tone.

"I'll take that as a *yes*," Mr. Findle said.

Penelope had her hands on her hips. The washed-out pumpkin silk of her dress made the gym look like an ironic fashion show backdrop. "As I said, I have personally seen Ella working on the project a number of times. I've chatted with her while she worked, and she never asked me to do a single thing on it."

"You are Mr. Penworth's twin?" Mr. Findle asked the obvious question to imply she'd lie for him.

Penelope's lips pinched.

Rawlings didn't answer. He'd gone into some sort of

hyper-focus that the teachers seemed to accept from him.

"Ella, still nothing to add?" Mr. Findle asked.

A million things. She'd done the orders, proposed ideas, worked on the physical structure. She'd done her part. The words wouldn't come, and Ella stared straight through him.

"From your grades in my class, I don't really see that you could have contributed more than sewing." Mr. Findle went to the project. "The sewing is a fine copy of what is in our school, but it's not original art. It's a copy. I don't see how that can constitute fifty percent of the project, which leads me to allow merit to the accusations."

Hale and Penelope's defenses were being ignored. Rawlings was the worst representative ever. Ms. Tooli had been Ella's favorite teacher, but she wasn't helping.

"To present another's work as your own is an egregious offense, Ms. Aschen. Expulsion will be without doubt."

No, really? Would they let her use part of her funds to get a ticket to Texas? Ugh. The Step would be horrible about this. Going to public school after the privilege of being at a place like this would be painful. She'd need a job. Her sewing money should cover at least a bus ticket if not a plane. Why had she made such a big deal over this model? Why had she drawn so much attention to herself? Mistake.

Mr. Findle turned to Hale. "To lend a lesser classmate a hand, while less of an offense, given that this is the autumn senior project and an enormous factor in your grade, has added weight in this situation. Factor in that this is Mr. Penworth's second time before the board for the issue of grade tampering and issues with classmates. Well, you also are under consideration for expulsion, Mr. Penworth."

Chapter 23

What? Ella stopped thinking about herself and focused on Hale. Hale, who worked so hard. Hale, whose bright future was being threatened.

Hale had his arms crossed over his chest, and his eyes were strained.

Ella's head snapped up, and her mind cleared. They didn't know her, of course they wouldn't believe her, of course they would dump her. But Hale...No. This was wrong. She and Hale had done their parts. Their project was simply better than the other students' projects. Some jealous student was making trouble. "I did my part." Her words came out gravely. She tried to think of how to prove it. "Ask me how any piece of it works."

Mr. Findle tilted his chin down. "Glad you found your voice, Ella, but we've all heard Hale present it multiple times. We all can recite how it works."

"I did a lot of the ordering. That will be recorded under my log-in."

Ms. Tooli straightened. "Excellent example. Orders and

the sewing. Now you see where we're going with this. What of the conceptual pieces?"

How did she prove she had a hand in the concept, and the mechanics? Ella looked hard at the project, the one she'd been so proud of, the one that had made her stupidly step up. A move that currently was ruining her date, her school year, her life. Pride made her want to say shove off, and leave. But there was Hale. Hale with his early acceptance. Hale, who'd been nothing but kind to her, and who'd been a good student at this school. Hale, who she cared about.

"Again. Strong efforts, which on any other project may constitute half, but not this one. Not every student has certain gifts." Mr. Findle's tone was pitying. "Though the students at St. Erskine's are remarkable, some excel beyond others."

"One of your first lectures went, 'As you see from this family tree, many people end up in similar careers to their forbears. Biology is destiny…'" She went on, quoting several more lines of it. All eyes were on Ella, and her insides tightened.

Penelope got her a chair, and she sank into it.

Mr. Findle blinked. "My lectures are memorable." His voice cracked. Uncertainty leaking in.

Hale was going to get kicked out because of her. What else could she do, what could she say? "Penelope, can you get me a deck of cards?"

Penelope bugged her eyes at her and then ran from the room. The recreation areas weren't far; there were always books and cards and games. Penelope was back in a minute. She handed her a deck. The cards were slick and new and had pictures of New England lighthouses and scenic coasts on the back.

Ella shuffled the deck. The feeling reminded her of the countless times she'd shown off this trick for her stepdad's poker game. After he left, she hadn't touched cards again until Penelope's strip poker game. Memorizing all the cards was a trick, but one that showed memory. She turned the cards over and flipped through them face up. She made her heart and mind calm so she could do what she needed to do, and ran through the story in her head. The Queen of Hearts pocketed a nine of clubs, she went to a dance club with five friends, where she found ten diamonds and broke three hearts… She didn't know how much time had passed, but when she had the order set she handed the cards to Ms. Tooli.

"Queen of Hearts."

Ms. Tooli flipped over the queen of hearts.

"Nine of clubs."

Ms. Tooli showed the card.

"Five of clubs." Ella went through all 52.

Everyone was quiet.

Ms. Tooli stared hard at her. "That's quite a memory you have. Though you haven't been exercising it in my class. Or have you? Can you recite any of my lessons?"

Ella swallowed and nodded. "All of them."

Now Hale was staring at her, too. Her heart beat harder.

Mr. Findle waved his hand in the air. "Memory tricks. Give us one thing, Ms. Aschen, one thing you worked on that Hale Penworth did not."

There were a million, but most they had worked on together. That's how they worked. The only thing she did that he didn't was organize things and straighten up. She doubted that would buy her any points.

"The blueprints," Hale said.

Relief hit her. An impossible burgeoning hope that they could dig their way out of this. "I found those. They're on my phone."

"There are no blueprints for this school," Mr. Findle said. "I teach history. I would know."

Yeah. There are. "If you'll…let me…" Ella pulled out her phone from the white beaded evening purse she'd borrowed from Penelope.

Mr. Findle didn't appear to want to look, so she held the screen up to his face and smiled encouragingly. Please look.

Mr. Findle stared hard at the side of her face. He tilted his head.

What? Punch? Ella swiped at her cheek.

Mr. Findle raised his eyes to hers and there was a new somberness in his expression. His gaze shifted to Rawlings.

What?

Rawlings was grinning as he pried open their hatch door.

She was losing this. Mr. Findle wouldn't even check the phone screen.

Mr. Findle stared harder at Rawlings, who was now tinkering with the wiring under the grass.

Her hands shook as she saw what he saw. Something familiar… Rawlings' profile, his one dimple, the curve of his ears. They were familiar.

They were like hers. Had she never seen him smile? She'd seen several expressions from him, but they were usually serious: teeth-gritting, hard rowing expressions; situation assessing expressions; intellectual thoughtful expressions. She hadn't seen him smile. Ear lobe shape and dimples were genetic. Mom didn't have dimples. Was this possible? Seeing

a resemblance, added to all he'd said. They were related. Really. They didn't look alike, but there was a resemblance, they had a connection. Her eyes burned and her mind whirled again, and a sense of peace came for the first time since the accusations. It was a small peace, but it was something that calmed her. It was bigger than this moment and these threats. She and Rawlings shared a trait. She wasn't alone.

"I'm now seeing the points Mr. Penworth and Ms. Aschen have made." Mr. Findle believed her, but he didn't. He saw two dimples, the same ear lobes, saw Rawlings standing up for her, the girl with no known ties to the school, and he suspected what it meant. He believed her because she had Rawlings' blood. Blood mattered to him. His class lectures made that clear. She was now perceived as smart enough because she was related to Rawlings.

Ms. Tooli frowned. "I'm not familiar with blueprints either. Where exactly did you see them?"

"Upstairs at the museum." If she was going to get in trouble for going into their off-limits area, so be it at this point.

Mr. Findle and Ms. Tooli shared a look. "Let's go then," Ms. Tooli said. "Grab a jacket if you need one."

No way she was running upstairs for a jacket. No one else did either. The cold stole her breath, and the twinkle-lit path seemed magical in the nighttime blackness. As they trudged along, she crossed her fingers that one, she didn't fall, and two, this was it. The museum find would save her.

Hale got the door and she ducked under the *Do Not Cross* tape and hit the lights. The museum appeared as always; white marble with all objects concealed by drop cloths.

She leaned into the fireplace, putting her shoulder to the trick spot, and it swung open. She pointed up the stairs. "It's up there."

Penelope hurried forward. "I didn't know it did that. Not that I've been in here in, like, forever."

Ella tried to catch Hale's gaze and show apology in her eyes. He'd assumed she'd found the blueprints at the library with her other research and she'd let him think that, wanting one place in this communal living space that was just hers. That was over now. Hale didn't look at her as they took the stairs.

Mr. Findle said, "I don't believe this." He sounded both cranky and thrilled at the same time. "Ella should have shown it to us." His attitude had eased considerably after seeing her resemblance to Rawlings.

Hale arched his eyebrows at the turn Mr. Findle had made and tilted his head. The set of his shoulders eased as if he could see the review panel tilting in their favor.

"This is certainly a rare and solid contribution to the school, much less Ms. Aschen's senior project," Ms. Tooli said.

Mr. Findle moved in front of the old blueprints and then on to the old photographs. "Given the importance of the find, we'll give Ella a pass. This probably merits bonus points for history class as well."

Ms. Tooli opened her palm. "Your full vote, Mr. Findle?"

They weren't supposed to vote until all the facts were in and things were discussed fully. Why was Ms. Tooli pushing it? Ella's throat tightened.

"Yes, yes, that's my vote. Clearly they did the work. The accusations have no merit."

"Agreed," Ms. Tooli said. "You are dismissed."

Relief swamped her. Oxygen flooded back into her body, making her almost dizzy. Hale closed his eyes and swallowed. He headed to the stairs, followed by a silent Rawlings, and a chatty Penelope.

Ms. Tooli held up her hand. "One more thing, Ella…"

"Yes?"

Ms. Tooli gave her the same look the elementary school field trip teachers gave when doling out instructions before they allowed anyone off the bus. "I'll expect your hand up for every question in my class."

"Yes, Ms. Tooli."

"In all your classes. Even if you don't know the answer, your hand will be up for a guess. But your wrong answer percentage will improve dramatically from this point forward. Your grades and test scores also will improve across the board. Is that right, Ms. Aschen?"

"Yes, Ms. Tooli." *Yes,* was all she could say unless she wanted to be booted back home. She eased toward the steps.

"I'll check in with all of your other teachers regularly. They will be in awe at your new, startlingly competitive side."

Ella took a step down. She wouldn't hide again. It had almost ruined her. Stepping up and competing hadn't hurt her. Hiding had. "Yes, Ms. Tooli."

"I'll quote one of your movies set in Texas, shall I? Just to be clear. 'Failure is not an option.' Not for you. Not anymore."

Ella nodded and went down. The main room was empty. Through the window, she could see the other three walking up to the school. Ms. Tooli spoke from behind her. "Your

future is yours, Ella. Forget the boys, the teachers, the other classmates. You're only hurting yourself when you hold back."

Ella nodded.

"No more."

Ella nodded.

Ella went back up to the school wanting to find Hale. He was talking to Penelope and Rawlings inside the main entry. Their words were hushed; their moods didn't appear happy. They definitely weren't going back to the ball. She felt raw, exposed, and exhausted after all the events of tonight, so she wasn't sorry.

Hale stared hard at her. "That's how you were going to get Penelope out of the strip poker game? You have quite a memory."

"She does," Rawlings said. "I missed it. Odd that."

"Mr. Findle never lets things go. He wanted me out last year. They had to bring a third teacher to break the deadlock. Why did he let it go tonight?"

Ella blinked. She knew why. Her gaze shot to Rawlings.

Hale moved closer. "What aren't you telling me?"

Rawlings touched the side of his cheek. "I believe he saw my dimple, like Ella's, like Dad's. Faint proof, I know, but he's into genetics. Dimple, ear shape, intellect...those are all genetically linked. He clearly suspects a relationship. Even if he doesn't realize she's my sister."

Penelope made a squeak.

Ella wanted to kick him. Now? Really?

"Your sister." Hale's words were flat.

"She was going to tell you tomorrow," Penelope said, like it would help.

"We were waiting until after the ball," Rawlings said. "It's after the ball."

"So my sister, my best friend and my date knew." Hale turned to Rawlings and Penelope. "Can you give us a minute?"

Don't go. Penelope and Rawlings went for the stairs like they were in Pompeii and Vesuvius was exploding behind them.

Ella twisted her hands together.

"Anything else you're lying about?"

That hurt. She pressed her lips together. "I didn't lie."

"You weren't upfront. I don't get you. You just repeated the lectures word for word. But you always say you're average. Not that I thought you were."

"They're not, I'm not…"

"Don't. Okay? If all you can get is a C, but you swing for it, you're a girl I want to know. That's a girl who is a part of things. But a girl who doesn't bother, who tanks herself … that girl…I don't want to know her." His words were angry but his expression was hurt more than anything else.

He left and she couldn't breathe. Literally couldn't breathe for seconds. The top of her nose stung and she blinked. Tonight had exploded like the pumpkins from Rawlings' video. Shattered mush.

Chapter 24

Ella's father would be at today's race. Her father. She rolled the word around on her tongue and still couldn't even whisper it aloud. She couldn't miss this. She wouldn't mess this up like last night. Ella got dressed in her school uniform and left for the docks.

Hale would be there, too. He might need time away from her, but she couldn't give it to him today.

Adrenaline killed her yawn and had her hurrying toward the boathouse. She tugged her coat tighter around her uniform, ignoring the sharp fall bite in the air. She'd slept poorly and had awakened late, which explained why most of the other students were already lining the riverbank and crowding the dock where the crew gathered for pre-race pep.

Penelope and Fritz stood apart from it all near the side of the boathouse. She could go around them, but it would take longer. Today, she wasn't missing out on where she needed to go. And that was near the boats, right up close. Whether it made Rawlings or Hale or anyone else uncomfortable, she didn't care. At a minimum, today she'd see her father.

Fritz took a swig of the blue sports drink the guys favored. He wore his race day blue spandex uniform with a sweater over his shoulders. "I can't believe you, Penelope. You couldn't do that one little thing, introduce my dad, and then you left me there like I had no date." Fritz spoke like he didn't care that others could hear him.

Penelope wore her uniform like Ella, tartan blue and black skirt over black tights, white shirt. She wore hers with an unbuttoned blue pea coat over the top and a yellow scarf. She held out her hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Fritz."

"It's unbelievable, you letting me down like that." Fritz was going to keep on whining, though he had to see that Ella almost had reached them and could hear their conversation. She must not register on his radar or, more likely, only the people he was planning to use for the moment earned his attention.

"My brother needed me. Don't you get that?" Penelope sank onto one of the wooden deck chairs and pressed her fingertips to her temples. Her scarf slid onto the deck. Neither of them bent to retrieve it. "How can you not understand?"

Sounds of the crowd by the river almost drowned out the next words.

Fritz shook his head and flung his arm out, holding his blue sports drink, making the pale liquid slosh over his hand and onto the deck. "Your brother. Your brother. That's all I hear about. Well, he couldn't do a favor for me, but he needs me to lead them to victory as a favor for him." He plunked down his drink on one of the small tables and wiped off the back of his hand. "To tell the truth, Penelope, I haven't been giving it my all. Everyone needs to know I'm pivotal for the

win. And nothing in this life comes free."

Ella wanted to beat him with an oar.

He strode away.

She went over to Penelope, not pretending she hadn't been listening. "You okay?"

Penelope shook her head. "I really liked him. I believed in him." She raised confused blue eyes upward. "What did I miss? How could I have been so taken in?"

The roar of the crowd grew louder; it was the sound the people on the banks made when the rowers marched in.

Ella squeezed her shoulder, and then bent and handed her the yellow scarf. "It wasn't you, okay? You were honest."

Penelope twisted the scarf around her hands. "I should feel lucky, but I really feel stupid."

The crowd roared again, and the speaker started announcing the guys' names.

Ella looked that way, but couldn't see anything through the crowd. "I need to talk to the guys. I want to talk to you more, I do, but I want to tell the guys what Fritz just said." Like Hale would want to hear from her. "I think Fritz is going to throw the race."

Penelope's mouth opened, and she shook her head. Then her eyes widened. "Let's go."

They ran down the deck, the pounding of their shoes on the smooth boards drowned out by the announcer's race day welcome, and the crowd's cheers and chatter.

Ella shoved her way through the students, pushing to get to the front, Penelope on her heels. She got there, breathless, and stared hard at Fritz, and then turned to Hale. "Fritz can't go today. He's not feeling well."

"Excuse me?" Fritz said.

Hale looked at the water instead of her.

"You sick, Strait?" Drake asked.

Rawlings tilted his head. "That true, Fritz?"

"Yeah." Ella kept her voice low but firm. "He was just telling Penelope he hasn't been giving it his all for some time, and given his disappointment over the lack of formal introductions at the ball, he's not feeling it today either."

Fritz gave her the stink eye, and then puffed out his chest. "Well, I'm what they've got. You don't understand how things work around here." He pointed to himself. "My father rowed for this team. Now I row."

She leaned in and lowered her voice so only he could hear. "Shall I tell them the rest or do you want to bow out gracefully? Because you're not getting in that boat without me telling them how you've been more than not feeling it and not pushing yourself, how you've been sand-bagging them, messing them up on purpose." She took a risk with the last statement, but somehow she knew it after his words to Penelope. Things were ten shades clearer today.

Fritz worked his jaw. "I'm out, guys. Sorry. Not feeling well."

Ella took his place in line as he backed into the crowd.

The coach jogged over, looking over-stuffed in his tracksuit. "What's going on?"

She'd met him a few times during practice, but didn't know him. "Fritz is sick." She swallowed. "I'm going to be his back up."

Coach frowned and shook his head. "No girls on the guys' team."

"This will work, Coach," Rawlings said. "I've done the calculations. She's light, lighter than Fritz."

Weight was a huge factor in races.

Coach's frown eased and he waved over one of the staff managing the event. "Last-minute replacement. She'll need a weigh-in." The guy carried a scale.

"What's she weigh?" Drake yelled out. "I think she'll need some sandbags."

The guys, except Hale, looked on intently.

Coach said, "If you're not over 110, we'll have to add some weights."

She stepped onto the scale.

"Over," Coach said, as if it were okay to announce her weight to the public. He sounded pleased.

Drake punched the air and then high-fived Logan. "Yes."

Rawlings nodded. "We won't have to take on extra weight, and you weigh significantly less than Fritz, so that's an advantage."

Ella didn't want to think too hard about this or she'd chicken out. Ignoring them, she held onto the post and climbed down into the boat. *Breathe.* She could do this. She didn't have to do anything really. Anyone sitting here was better than Fritz.

Rawlings got in next. "Just keep us in the middle of the river." He went over the steering, and she only heard half of what he was saying over her pounding heart.

"And shout 'row,' I need the measured cadence," Logan said. "You sure you got this? You look kind of pale. We can get one of the junior guys. But they haven't practiced with us like you have."

"Yeah." She did not sound confident.

All the guys were in the boat now, hooking their feet in, and taking up their oars. In two breaths, they'd rowed to the

middle of the river. The actual speed was a rush. A cold, terrifying rush compounded by the two boats moving into position on either side of them.

They got their boats aligned. "Dude, this is such a bad idea," Drake said. "And, I'm so in."

"Shay Prep," the starter called from the banks.

Ella closed her eyes for a second and tried to calm her heart.

"St. Erskine Prep," the starter said, continuing the polling.

Her heart jolted again, and one of the guys responded.

They were ready. She'd done this. She'd done this with Hale on the river, and she'd done it in countless practices. The guys knew her voice. Their grades had risen with her tutelage; their time could improve as well. She could do this.

"Bar Prep," the starter said, and got their response.

"Attention." The starter raised a red flag.

Here we go. She put her hand on the cable. Keep it down the middle. That's all she had to do. Keep it down the middle and don't hit the other boats or logs or any other debris.

"Go!" The starter brought the flag down with two hands.

Chapter 25

"Row!" Ella's voice got carried off by the wind and she sucked in a deep breath. "Stroke, 1, 2, 3, 4. Row, 1, 2, 3, 4." Her hands hurt from clenching the cable. She should have taped them like the guys did theirs, but there hadn't been time. She tried to relax her grip, but was too tense. One by one, the other boats passed them. She eased her shoulders; she hadn't let them hit another boat.

"Guys, everyone has passed us. You don't have to worry. Look over your shoulders."

The guys did, but they weren't relieved. They cussed, every one of them. Okay, so they wanted this. She tightened her grip. "We're in our own lane. We're dead center in the river, no debris in sight. I can keep us here. So if you want this, you have to dig deeper. Row."

Spray misted the air, and she didn't have to imagine they were going faster. The students lining the embankment blurred. They passed the first of five quarter-mile marks. If they came in last, Fritz would be so justified. She balanced counting off the strokes with encouraging words. She didn't

try to correct anyone's form or strokes. She didn't have the knowledge. Today had to be about wanting it more.

"Shay Prep is up ahead on the right. We can take them at the half-mile mark if you want it. Row." She breathed in and out, not pacing her breaths like the guys did, just trying not to hyperventilate. The boat would not tip. No oars would come loose. They wouldn't tip upside down on the river with the guys' shoes caught in the foot brackets. *Stop.*

The brisk wind rushed by her, the dark water carried them along, the speed made it feel like flying. They caught the other boat at the mile mark, leaving only them and Bar Prep racing to the finish. Crews raced without a coxswain guiding them. They didn't need her, but she'd practiced with them over so many morning homework sessions, and she'd steered with Hale on the river. She could help. "You've got this. It's us and Bar Prep. I've got the boat straight; you saved up for this. They've blown all their energy; you paced yourself, and now it's time to go after it. The win is yours to take."

They edged up to Bar Prep, but those guys were flying, too.

"Pass them and I'll tell you which of the girls really like you. Not enough? I know you have more left. You know this river. This is your river."

They were side by side with Bar Prep. Too close for her comfort, but too close to the finish line for her to back off now.

"Those are your classmates watching, your parents, your girlfriends. Get this and I'll tell you the best make-out spot on campus. One I guarantee you didn't know about. Row."

They pushed, the waves pushed, the other teams pushed,

and they both blew past the finish line.

"One!" the judge called, and the flagman dropped the first flag. "Two!"

The guys bent from exertion, some collapsing over their knees, some arched backward, their arms overhead.

"Were we one or two?" Logan asked.

"No clue." Ella's throat hurt from screaming into the wind throughout the race.

Rawlings threw his arms out, stretching them. "They could protest your lack of uniform or any number of things. You can't tell, with that kind of finish."

"Nah, what she's wearing weighs way more than our gear," Logan said.

"Which girls like me?" Drake's voice came out in huffed pants.

"Well, that was quite unlike a session with Fritz." Rawlings' hair was dampened with sweat, coloring it two shades darker. He swiped it off his forehead.

She adjusted the tiller to guide them over to the bank.

They got to the edge of the finish dock where their gear was stowed. The dock was limited to coaches and staff, but students crowded behind them as they waited for the judge to deem the race official and for the announcer to name the victor.

Hale tied off the boat and got out first, shrugging on the tracksuit handed to him by one of the assistants.

Drake jumped from the boat, doing a headfirst flip into the freezing water in just his spandex racing gear. She wouldn't have jumped in without a wetsuit.

The judge and the referee held up white flags. "It was a photo-finish," the announcer said into a megaphone and the crowd screamed.

Rawlings and Logan gave her a hand up.

Drake climbed up beside them, shaking like a wet dog.

"St. Erskine..." The announcer finished their school name, but she couldn't hear it over the roar of approval from the crowd and the rush of adrenaline.

The next moment was hugs and slaps on the back and being pulled into the center of the guys for photos, holding a silver trophy cup that made her arms ache, and passing it back to the guy behind her.

Hale.

His gaze met hers for a moment, his expression happy, but his eyes were conflicted. He brought the cup over his head, making the amassing crowd who'd run along the riverbank to the end scream impossibly louder.

Ella forced her gaze forward. Winning felt amazing...like flying along the water, like standing near Hale—the combination of all three was magic.

Chapter 26

The team melted into the crowd, surrounded by congratulations. Penelope hugged her. "That was amazing." She clung to her arm. "Fritz is...whatever." She looked over at Hale, who was amid a group of back-slapping guys and hugging girls. "But my brother. He's worth it. So whatever you've got to do to fix this..."

Champagne spewed over their heads as several members of the alumni popped corks and sprayed out the liquid. Cool droplets landed against her cheek and in her hair.

Nadine shoved into their group, bypassing girls from her dorm waiting to congratulate her. "So you're the Coxie now?"

Sort of. "No."

Penelope gave her a solid look, and then pushed her way past Shayla in her red coat to give her brother a hug.

Kira pushed in and gave her a high-five.

Ella slapped her hand and moved to go past Nadine. She didn't owe her anything.

Nadine stepped in her path while the crowd chattered

and yelled around them, everyone moving up toward the school. "What's going on? I can't believe Rawlings left the dance with you guys."

"Nothing's going on."

"You don't leave if nothing's going on. Mr. Findle and Ms. Tooli left the ball, too. I saw it all, you know. That's why I'm asking."

Nadine had made the accusations. She just knew it. She smiled a bland smile. "All's good here."

Nadine's face scrunched up. "What happened? My boyfriend was involved. I have a right to know."

"Worry about yourself, Nadine. Stay out of my business." Her Texas twang came out hard on the last words.

"If you didn't do anything wrong, there was nothing to worry about." Nadine looked self- justified, and there was no sane reason why. "You should have nothing to hide."

Breathe in. Breathe out. This was her brother's girlfriend. Family came with drawbacks. If she wanted a shot at a relationship with Rawlings, Nadine was part of the current package. She held up her palm to stop Nadine talking and hurried on.

***

"Can we talk?" Ella stood in the doorway to Hale's room. She held two mugs of cider.

He didn't look interested.

She put the mugs down on his dresser.

Hale had showered and changed into his school uniform. His hair was wet, and his expression cold. "Thanks for helping out today." The words were gracious, but it was the face of a stranger.

It hurt, and she couldn't deal with it now. She turned to leave.

A group was coming through the main door into the boys' commons, which was awkward because she'd been in Hale's room. Recognition came in a flash, stopping her feet and her heart. *The Rawlings Family.* She hadn't seen them at the game. But they were here now.

Rawlings had changed, too, and looked like he did every day. Tall thin guy with dark hair in a school uniform: khakis, a blazer, white shirt, and tartan tie. He moved to the fireplace, talking to the couple behind him. It was weird seeing grown-ups in the commons who weren't their teachers. They were his parents. She recognized them from the Internet. The woman, Diane, was fair with bobbed blonde hair. She had her hand on the man's arm. It was harder to look at the man, but once she did, she couldn't tear her gaze away. The man wore a navy suit with a blue alumni tie. He was tall like Rawlings, his hair just as dark, his skin just as pale. He resembled Rawlings. He was Rawlings' father.

He is my father.

Hale came up behind her as if to ask what the hold-up was, but he must have seen what she saw. He put his hand on the back of her waist, as if to move her along or hold her back, she didn't know which, she just knew she couldn't move.

Rawlings kept talking. They'd caught Rawlings mid-rant, and his parents seemed to be patiently waiting him out. More exceptions for geniuses.

"Yes, we took care of crew to get the race won. We cannot take care of the whole rowing community. But we take care

of our part of it, our crew and our school. If everyone did this, the world would be a better place. But we can't take care of the world. Only our parts of it. I've controlled the situation the best I can. Opportunities. Fairness. Distance. But there's society, then there's family. Branches and extensions and it's not enough." He blew out his breath and held out his arms. *"What about Ella?"*

Ella shrank into Hale, but he didn't let her retreat.

Here were answers she wanted. Why had her father left her with only a small monthly stipend? That inheritance hadn't been from Mom's family. The Rawlings' family doled it out. Now, she'd get her answers. Why her father had left. Why she wasn't enough.

Rawlings' father put his hand on his son's shoulder and had him sit beside his mother. He squatted before them.

He took both their hands in his.

Rawlings' father, her father, faced his son and his wife and she could read the clear sincerity in his expression.

Now she'd get her answers. *Why?*

"Who's Ella?"

Chapter 27

Ella blinked, and her knees caved. Hale steadied her against him and cursed.

Rawlings popped up and paced in front of the fireplace.

His dad moved beside his mother. "You're making yourself sick. Stop analyzing the situation and give me the answer, kiddo. Who's Ella?"

"My sister."

Ella couldn't stop the strangled noise and covered her mouth with her palm.

Rawlings looked over at her and his face blanched.

His dad widened his eyes at his wife and shook his head denying the situation.

"You're confused," his mom said, in one of those soft mom-tones.

Doubt stirred. She covered her wrist with her other hand.

Rawlings motioned for her to come forward. She didn't want to. Hale nudged her and walked her over to the couch until she sat down.

Rawlings' dad looked at her without recognition.

Hale offered him his hand. "Mr. Rawlings."

"Hello, Hale. Could you give us a moment? I know we've invaded your commons...."

She had no right to ask him to stay. She'd face these people on her own. Her father? Her brother? It was too much to wrap her head around. She looked at Hale but said nothing.

He came to her and sat down, close enough she could feel his warmth. "I'll stay with Ella, sir, if you don't mind."

She adored him in that moment, whether he liked her or not.

Rawlings' father nodded at her. "So you're Ella?" He had eyes more green than hazel, sharp, smart eyes.

She nodded.

Rawlings' mom was staring at her, too. She moved closer on the couch. She had blue eyes, the kind with brownish-yellow around the pupils. Ella sat very still, so over her head she scarcely dared breathe.

Rawlings' dad turned to him. "From the beginning, son. Clearly. Slowly. Bullet points."

"I hacked into our finances to ensure none of our accountants were screwing around." Rawlings nodded. "All major expenditures accounted for."

His father looked indulgent and patient. "Good."

"There was this 100k lump sum the year before I was born. It stuck out because there were 3k monthly payments after that. Every month."

"To?"

"Marie Aschen."

Three thousand? She hadn't known that. That was enough for a coat.

Rawlings' dad made fists and then he let them go. "I dated Marie the summer before I moved home and started dating your mom." He ran his hand over his hair. "That was a really long time ago."

Her nerves tightened. They were speaking of her mom. She always missed her, but especially now. Now when she needed answers. Now when she needed her. Her breathing quickened as his words confirmed what she knew.

"I dug deeper, and I found the payoff. The 'I won't pursue the paternity line of questioning further' payoff."

Rawlings' dad shook his head. "I didn't do that."

Rawlings tightened his lips. "I thought it was a lie, but then I thought about this kid out there living on 3k and not having the opportunities I had. I dug deeper. Then I thought, why not give her the opportunities I have? No one would need to know."

"So you sent Ella the invitation to St. Erskine Prep and paid her tuition." This was from Hale. He sounded mad.

"Yeah, and to ensure she'd be okay, I had her switched to be your lab partner so you could help her. That's all I did." Rawlings looked skyward. "Oh, and the DNA sample from her glass."

Rawlings' mom got teary. She opened her purse and dug for a tissue.

Hale put his mouth to her ear. "They're good people. The Rawlings. Give them a chance." He rose. "I'll leave you to talk."

She still didn't want him to go but had no right to make him stay. He'd stayed for more than he probably should have. She'd had her chance to include him in her mystery and she hadn't taken it.

Rawlings' dad rose and took out his phone. He hit a number and put the phone to his ear. He paced over to the window. "Dad?"

Her brother wore a satisfied expression now, like someone who'd solved a puzzle. He dropped back to the couch. "Grandpa. Grandpa would hide paternity. Dad would not. I should have considered that. Of course." He smiled over at them, relieved, and slapped his knee. "I shouldn't have missed that."

Rawlings' mom got up and moved exactly beside Ella. She wore a kind expression, a mom expression. "You're very pretty." She smiled at her and at Rawlings. "I always wanted to sneak in another kid, but it didn't happen for us. The world works in such a crazy way."

Tears burned Ella's eyes. She pushed them back, and blew out a breath.

Rawlings' mom handed her a tissue. "Tell me about yourself."

Chapter 28

Ella was leaving chemistry with mixed emotions. Sitting up, giving the class her total focus, gave it a different dimension. The competitive throwing up of her hand had been nauseating and exhilarating all at once.

"Hold up, Ella."

Ella went over to Ms. Tooli's desk.

"Rawlings sent over some of these images." Ms. Tooli was drinking a bottled water. She set it at the top of her desk and screwed on the lid, careful not to get it on the papers she had spread out in front of her like they were special.

The papers were printouts of her Pinterest boards. They were her designs and drawings. Some of them had been private. She felt her eyes widen and her face tighten. She needed a more difficult password.

"These are remarkable. I've put them together as a portfolio and sent them off to a design friend. Using the dates on your drawings, my designer friend saw real progress, and most importantly, he saw a passion for design. While your grades have been mediocre to this point, I've assured

him you have the drive and commitment to finish a demanding design program."

Ella sank down onto a stool. Her palms were sweaty, her stomach knotted.

"Is that true, Ms. Aschen? If he were to give you a scholarship into their School of Design, is that something you would want to do with your life?"

More than anything. Her heart raced, her brain spun. Could she? Her? Impossible. "I don't have the money for school."

"That's not what I asked. If you got a scholarship, would you be interested?"

Ella nodded. The nod was one of the scariest things she'd done in her life, but once she'd started, she could not stop nodding. It was as if she were one of those bobble-head dolls balanced on a trampoline when an earthquake hit.

"So let me ask you again, Ms. Aschen. What do you want to do when you grow up?"

Say it, Ella. Just tell her. Open up. "I want to design ball gowns. For now, that's my main interest, but the other technologies they're developing with fabric are fascinating. Air-conditioned coats. Artwork-printed fabric. Glow-in-the-dark detailing. I'd like to explore those." A million more words rushed her and she forced herself not to gush. She'd done the hardest part, and now with the teacher's acceptance, all she wanted to do was talk about it. The way she hadn't been able to talk to anyone since Mom passed.

"Very good, Ms. Aschen. I'll see you in my office Friday and we'll discuss this further, and work on your formal college applications."

She wiped her sweaty palms on the side of her skirt. Still

the practicalities, the realities… "That's not something…it's not for kids like me."

"College is for many kids. In some form or the other. They just may not recognize it or know the right program at your age. Design school is for you. There's a program in Boston you may be interested in, and, of course, New York. I've sent you some links to check out during study time."

It was sort of a dismissal. Ms. Tooli had no doubt she could do this, and she wasn't accepting doubts from Ella.

Ella nodded.

She went to the door and then paused to turn back. "Thank you, Ms. Tooli."

"You're welcome, Ms. Aschen."

***

Ella took a deep breath and dialed her stepmom.

"Yes?" The Step had the distracted tone she got when she was focusing on the TV. Ella could imagine her there in her cracked recliner, soda can sweating in the armrest cup-holder. She could hear the TV in the background because the Step hadn't bothered to mute the show she was watching. "Yes?" Now she had her impatient tone.

That helped Ella say what she had to say. "I'm taking an internship after graduation. I won't be back. So I'm letting you know the stipend money ends this month." She hadn't spoken with Rawlings about it, but was certain he could ensure that money came to her or was set into an account for her as the grandfather she'd never met had intended. Not that he'd intended it as a kindness, it sounded more like 'go away' money, but regardless, she'd been ignoring the situation too long. She needed to take control over her own

life, and now she was doing it. "The house is going up for sale."

"Wait just one minute. I have bills." Nerves entered her stepmom's voice, nerves and anger. "Don't think I won't pursue this in court. You owe me."

Did she? She didn't think so. "That will be fine. I'm sure you have records showing that the money went to me, and that you have kept the house in perfect condition. If not..."

Her stepmom hung up.

She wasn't angry, except at herself for not standing up to the situation sooner. It had been easier to let it go, giving money to a woman who wouldn't help her get a coat. She hadn't realized that had been the proverbial straw at the time. But it had been, and that was the last call she'd make to that woman.

Her phone buzzed with a text from her brother. *Her brother.* Wow. How crazy was that.

"My parents are headed out. Will you join us at the hotel?"

Yes, Ella texted back, grabbed her navy long coat, and went downstairs. She walked across the grounds to the path that led to the hotel. It took twenty minutes, and then she was there. The building was mostly windows and appeared as beautiful in the daylight as it had the night of the ball. A doorman opened the door for her. "Coat?" He held out his arm.

She'd warmed up on the way over, but wanted her coat on. "No thanks." She stood there feeling anything but casual. "Rawlings party, please."

"This way."

The Rawlings family sat at a table off the foyer. They had

drinks on coasters and carried off a laid-back ski-lodge casual look: camel-colored slacks with fall sweaters.

Rawlings' mother patted the armrest of an empty seat.

Ella took the seat, sitting very still and straight while her emotions churned up her insides like the winds off of Galveston stirred up the waves.

"Ella, we'd like you to join us for school breaks," Rawlings' mom said. "We're not trying to push anything on you, but you can call me Diane, and I hope you'll give us the chance to get to know you."

"Ella, I didn't know about you. I swear it," Rawlings' dad, *her* dad, said. He blinked and cleared his throat. "It's unacceptable to me that my father kept you away. We'd like to start fixing that at the first possible chance. Winter break. And then spring break and summer. We'd like the chance, if you'll give it to us."

Ella's gaze flashed to her brother. He nodded.

"Okay." It was all she could say. It was a small word and it was everything.

Diane clapped and put her hand on her husband's arm. "There. That wasn't so bad, now was it?" If she hadn't been so kind, everything about this would've been much harder.

Ella breathed out. She wanted this so much it hurt, and she was scared to say the wrong thing.

Diane smiled. "Is your step-family going to put up much of a fuss?"

Diane seemed the type of stepmom who would protest a kid being taken away.

"No."

"They have no rights here," her dad said. "I'm going to make sure of it."

She had no idea what made him sound so firm. Something in her expression? Something Rawlings had said?

"I'll email you the details," her dad said.

"Okay," she said again.

They hugged her, and then headed to the exit.

She and her brother walked them out and stood there together, watching them go over to a town car.

Her dad paused before getting in. "Son, you find out any more Earth-shattering news, and you give me a call right away. Don't manage it yourself."

"Yes, sir," Rawlings said.

"You too, Ella."

"Yes, sir." She blinked at how much she enjoyed being chastised in that teasing Dad tone.

Then he got in and they pulled off down the driveway.

"Rawlings."

"Yes?"

"Thank you for this." Her voice came out gravelly.

"There's nothing to thank me for. You're one of us. We just didn't know it. Now we do."

Chapter 29

Ella's phone buzzed. *Meet me in the Escape Room. Tell no one.* The text was from Penelope.

Ella was so thankful that Penelope had remained her friend after all the fuss that she kept her eye roll small at the dramatic words. She went down to the study rooms.

No one was outside the Escape Room; the area was quiet.

She stepped inside the dark foyer and read the instructions on the room divider. *Solve the puzzles to escape. Hit the buzzer by the door to start your clock. You have one hour.* Why did Penelope want her to do this again? She'd gone through it as fast as she could last time. "Penelope, I…" The sentence cut off.

Hale had come in the entry. The door shut behind him.

He frowned. "What are you doing here?"

His frown spoke more of confusion than annoyance, but she missed his welcomes. She missed him. "Meeting Penelope. You?"

Hale closed his stormy eyes. "Meeting Penelope."

Ella shifted from foot to foot and looked at her phone.

"Should we give her a few minutes?"

Hale stared at her like she'd sharpened the wrong end of a crayon.

"What?"

"This is a setup."

Heat flushed her face. How embarrassing. Penelope had forced him to come talk to her. That was so Penelope. She went for the door.

It wouldn't open. She was locked in a room with the guy she wanted, the guy she couldn't have.

"Ella."

"I didn't do this." The edge of desperation in her voice came from the heart of someone who hated being foisted on anyone.

"I know."

She grabbed her phone, though she knew reception was crap in this part of the building. It was why Penelope and Fritz had chosen it—it kept people trapped. And no one had protested them confiscating these rooms for the semester because the Wi-Fi signal didn't work in here.

She had no bars on her phone. "We're stuck." She rubbed her thumb over the keyhole. It was an ordinary house lock, it just sealed you in. "We need to find the key."

"I'm not voting for Fritz's dad." His voice eased, and held a hint of his old good humor. Hale moved the screen aside.

The dim room was divided in half by a white twinkle-lit curtain over a locked door. A small, oval, two-seated table sat in the middle. An unlit faux battery candle sat beside a vase holding a single red rose. A silver-domed food cover topped a china plate. "What is this?" He had his hands on his hips, and clearly didn't see the romance, the beauty.

Ella walked over and took her seat, heat impossibly burning her face even hotter. "Romantic Escape Room," she mumbled.

"What?"

"Penelope thought if Fritz saw her in a romantic setting, he'd see her as more than your little sister."

He looked around the small space. "This is my sister's idea of love—trap the guy?"

Yep. Ella kicked his foot under the table. "Give her a break." She lifted the lid.

A note sat atop a white baker's box. *Dress for dinner.* A pink dressing room screen stood in one corner, a blue one in the other. Ella went to the pink screen. Sure enough, there was a dress hanging on the back of it. "There's clothes."

"I'm not doing this." Hale sounded like the kid who didn't want anything healthy in his smoothie and refused to drink it. They always did, though.

"Then wait out the hour. I'll solve it myself." This room was made for a couple, so the puzzles were meant to be solved by more than one person, but as she'd proven recently, she was fairly clever. She unpinned her skirt, trying not to remember how it had unraveled the first day she'd met him. She stepped into the dress and once it covered her hips, she pulled off her shirt. She slid the gown up. The dress was red, fitted and had cutouts on both sides. It wasn't the romantic, floating, chiffon thing she would have imagined. It was slithery seduction.

It came with stilettoes, size seven.

Penelope wore a size six shoe. Penelope had adjusted whatever she'd had planned for herself to fit Ella and Hale. Leaving her clothes in a pile behind the screen, Ella came out.

Hale had crossed his arms over his chest in a position of refusal. He stared at her, opened and closed his mouth, and then got up. "I'll change."

Even the most complex guy could be very simple sometimes.

He returned quickly. His outfit was black dress pants and a flowing, untucked white shirt. "Don't say it."

He reminded her of the duke from her novel. "I wasn't. You look handsome."

Hale sank into the other chair. "Now what?"

"Where's the 'Give it your all,' Hale?" She was part teasing, part annoyed, and part sorry—and altogether she missed their easy friendship. She'd blown that.

He closed his eyes. "Sorry." He clapped his hands together. "Let's do this."

The baker's box held two pink-iced cookies, and two mini waters. "This can't be a clue." Hale ate his cookie.

"It's probably so our blood sugar stays high." Ella pressed her lips together. This was so embarrassing and wasn't romantic. "When we brainstormed, we read about sugar and mood, and associating caffeine rushes with your date. You're supposed to associate the rush with me."

A blush hit his cheekbones. "I'm not… We're not…"

His words made her sad, but she shook it off. "I know." She licked her lips. "That's why I'm telling you." She lowered her voice to a faux seductiveness. "And not tricking you."

"I like the voice."

Guys. She grinned and shook her head. She liked his voice, too, but she didn't tell him.

Hale looked at the blank underside of the box. "What's next? There's nothing here."

Ella lifted the candle. A switch embedded in the bottom connected to a wire that ran through a hole in the table. She flipped the switch. The twinkle-lit curtain went dark and an overhead black light lit the room. Ella closed her eyes against the change and re-opened them to focus. A poem by Fedarb lit the wall in fluorescent pink-black light paint. *My love for you is like a red, red rose ...*

She turned off the candle and blinked as the room went back to its previous dim lighting. Like when the main lights went down at the mall, and just a few security beams kept the area lit.

Hale lifted the rose from the vase and handed it to her. A key was tied to the end. Ella carried it over to the main entry.

It didn't fit.

She took it over to the room divider door.

It slid in.

Success. They could do this. She looked at him as she turned the key.

The next space they entered was small, like the foyer, with two steps leading to a platform on one end. There was no visible door or clue. Ella climbed to the platform. The walls here had futuristic swirls. She recognized the images from movie night. "Oh."

"What is it?"

"Penelope's favorite movie."

"*Terminator*?"

"Yeah. I think you have to come up on the platform with me. Like they did when they time traveled." The couple embraced and faced their future together...without clothes.

"Naked?"

"There's no naked in this." Ella jerked back, her hands on her hips. She loved playful Hale. "Leave your clothes on; the Escape Room version of time travel will allow the clothes to pass through time."

Hale wore a solid grin as he stepped onto the platform. Once he was there with her, their combined weight made the plywood floor sink down. Ella grabbed his arms to remain steady. The base hit the ground and they stood there, as if inside a giant tire.

The wall to her right rolled back.

"What the…"

A white, full-sized bed with a full canopy stood before them. Rose vines twined around the bedposts. White satin sheets were turned back against a plum comforter. *Everyone looks good in plum; it's one of those colors.* Penelope had told her that. If she slid up there, his eyes would glow with appreciation.

Hale's blue eyes were wide and horrified.

It made her twinge on the inside. "What?"

"Was…is my sister…"

Ella looked at the bed. Relief. He wasn't appalled at the thought of her, just the thought of his sister rolling around with Fritz. "No. Ew. Relax, Hale. She set this up for us. She's not 'with' Fritz. She's over him."

Hale hissed out a breath and climbed over the side of their time travel device. He helped her out.

He let go of her once she was in the bedroom too, and then he tossed himself back on the bed. He put his hands behind his head. Plum flattered him. Everything flattered him. "Good, because…"

"Let it go. She wanted us to reconsider. She thought we

were good together. Good for each other." Ella joined him. She put her head on the pillow and looked up. The underside of the canopy was covered in tiny stars. She sucked in her own breath. It was beautiful.

Hale turned on his pillow to face her. "This part was your contribution, wasn't it? The stars at night."

"Yeah." Ella couldn't leave it at that. She needed to let him in. "Besides Galveston, Mom and I used to go camping. It's not my thing, but it made her happy. We'd go out to west Texas. We had to go far because of the city lights." She pointed to the million stars. "And the sky looks like that, you know, once you take away the man-made lights. It doesn't look how we see it at all; it's a million tiny lights. I know it's relative, how Van Gogh saw halos around stars, but city dwellers see only the Moon and the North Star. This is the sky Mom showed me."

"You never talk about her."

She'd told him a little of her family and how she hadn't known her real dad.

Ella's voice grew far away. "It was a car wreck that took her. She was going for a job interview." She swallowed. "I'd pushed her, you know. To go for the better job. But we were fine, I should have left it alone, and she'd still be here."

Hale put his hand on her arm and murmured, "No."

Ella turned to him. "I know. It's not true, but you think like that when something happens. What could have prevented it? Where did things go so wrong? How normal can end so completely. What family means."

Hale tugged, pulling her over until she lay against his side, his strong warmth comforting her.

"How do you feel about the Rawlings?"

It was difficult to put words to the mixed emotions. Angry, confused, happy. "I feel everything about it." Her fists tightened in the material of his shirt. "And so mad. I really needed a Dad when Mom passed. And now I have one after I don't need one. I can take care of myself."

"We always need our families."

The weight of his words made her shake, and he rubbed her back in a soothing motion. "They are so lucky to have found you. You're sweet, kind, smart."

She bit her lip on the caring behind the words until she came back to the present. That was a lot of sharing for a girl who kept her thoughts close, and she felt open, vulnerable. "Sorry." She tried to pull back.

Hale tightened his arms. "I'm sorry I said I didn't want to know you."

"I get it." The conversation was fully about them now. She didn't try to hide her crush, her admiration. She let her feelings show on her face and in her eyes.

"I do know you." Hale's voice was deep. "I know the effort you put into things that matter, like our project, our friendship. The secret clues you put in the monograms." He gestured to the sky. "This part of the room, I knew this part was you...so beautiful how you see the world." His voice was a mix of emotions with more than a shadow of how he felt before. "I just wanted to know you. I couldn't stand that I couldn't get closer to you. I couldn't even get you to tell me what kind of drink you liked."

Ella threaded her hand into his hair. She gave it a tug like the duke had done in her romance novel. It got his full attention and made his eyes darken. "I liked it that when I was cold you brought me hot cider. I liked the creamy hot

chocolate. I like that you brought enough for me every time, that you thought of me. Peppermint tea, Earl Grey tea, hibiscus flower tea. And I love that it made me think of you and kisses, cinnamon kisses, peppermint kisses."

Ella kissed him, a soft tentative kiss, more of a brush of lips than a kiss. She kept her hands in his hair. He slid his hands to her waist and pulled her fully on top of him. Ella shifted. He felt amazing, strong. Hale rolled her over and took charge of the kiss. Soft. Slow. Deep. Forgiving.

"You feel so good." Her words were thin without air, like the emotions had squeezed the strength from them.

Hale groaned. He moved his mouth to her neck and glanced over her skin as softly as she'd kissed him earlier, and then deeper with a graze of his teeth and a sucking bite. She went from enjoying the sensations to a fuzzy-brained creature of feeling.

She slipped against the sheets, shifted against him, and it was as if the stars fell into them.

"Yoo hoo."

Words.

"Uh. Guys. The room is unlocked now."

It was Penelope's voice.

"Don't be mad at me, okay?" The rushed plea from Penelope came from the foyer.

Epilogue

Hale's rolled-up crimson Harvard T-shirt cushioned Ella's cheek as he spread sunscreen on her back. The coconut fragrance and the salty Atlantic air smelled like summer as the Rawlings' family yacht rocked gently beneath them.

Beige deck shoes came into view. Her brother Rawlings squatted on his heels beside Hale. "I don't know how this sister thing works. I'd tell you 'hands off,' but you're one of the best guys I know. So it's for the best that Ella picked you. Maybe I should date your sister—"

"No." Hale's voice was firm, and his hands slid off her back.

She turned her head. He'd moved onto his stomach next to her. He tilted his shoulder into hers in a playful, affectionate gesture. She kissed his shoulder. He leaned sideways and kissed her lips. His were smooth with balm and he tasted like the frozen pineapple drinks they were sipping.

"Yo."

They pulled apart to look at Rawlings.

"Still here." Rawlings shoved his sunglasses on top of his

head. "What do you mean you can't join us in Vegas?" The question was for Hale.

Ella had taken the St. John internship. Hale had no interest in it, though he swore he'd come up and see her. She'd be headed to Vegas next week to start her job.

"I'll be there. Just later."

"I've arranged a kick-ass party."

"And you'll look out for Ella."

"Of course." The words were solid, like Hale had stated the obvious. Ella looked down and blinked at the emotion. She and Rawlings had missed the pre-teen bickering years and had fallen into a fast, if new, friendship that had that unbreakable feeling. Like she'd had with her childhood friends who still sat with her at lunch though she was lost in her grief, who had still emailed though she'd moved to Massachusetts. But this was also something more. A blood tie she hadn't experienced since Mom passed.

And for that, she'd put up with a lot. Including making nice with his girlfriend Nadine. She could pretend she didn't know Nadine turned them in for cheating, because hurting Nadine meant hurting Rawlings. And Rawlings didn't know it fully yet, but she had his back, too.

Ella kept the email from her dad and Diane in her purse, cementing the conversation they'd had after her school holiday trips to their home had gone so well. *We hope you'll spend the summer with us after finishing your internship.* They'd signed it, *Love, Mom & Dad.* It was stupid and sentimental, but she kept it close. She'd be going to Connecticut after her internship and before going off to college in New York.

"Have you told Nadine about me yet?"

"Those who know know. Those who don't should work it out for themselves or they don't need to know."

She pitied Nadine.

"Or they'll know in the fall when the family makes a formal announcement." Rawlings' eyes were unreadable behind his sunglasses and he rose with one arm. "It's going to be epic." He left them there to have a word with the captain and pointed toward turquoise water up ahead.

For a senior trip, a weeklong voyage on the family yacht was something she never expected. Of course, she'd never expected to graduate at the top of her class and be headed to New York in the fall, with plans to meet her boyfriend for weekends on the East Coast when he got away from Harvard. Life was better than she'd ever imagined. And if she could go back in time, she'd tell that girl back home to just hold on. Let the effort, the struggle, and the confusion have their payoffs. Reach for it, and let life surprise her.

The brush of Hale's lips on her cheek had her twisting closer so he could land the kiss on her lips. The rush was better than sailing. "You need a refill. Tell me what to bring you."

"Surprise me."

Book Club Topics/Questions

- What twists on the classic Cinderella were present?
- Why would someone hide their intelligence?
- Why do girls raise their hands less than boys?
- What themes of the book spark further debate: nurture vs. nature, hiding your light…?
- Have your teachers managed your expectations or encouraged you to aim higher?

Note to Readers

Thanks for reading! You've changed my life. I hope you'll leave a review. I do my best to read them all and value your thoughts. Best regards, Emily

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Stay (Release date November 2016)

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Accidental Billionaire (Occurs the summer after this book. You'll recognize visiting characters from this book: Ella, Fritz, Nadine, Rawlings, Kira, Logan…)

The Accidental Movie Star

The Accidental TV Star

Accidental Action Star

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Accidental Cinderella

A ball…a gown…a pumpkin…and a happily ever…this standalone, contemporary YA romance has them all.

When Ella receives an exciting invitation to attend an exclusive boarding school, she knows she won't fit it. These kids are elite, wealthy, and driven. She's 'average Ella' on a scholarship…at least, that's what she wants everyone to believe. A lost shoe…a lost shirt…oh my…When events push her to need a boyfriend, Ella asks hot senior Hale.

His response? "No."

Yep. That's her fairytale.

Hale's driven, and he needs an A on the fall project. He doesn't need the sweet but average scholarship girl screwing up his grade – not after last year. Tanking science will ruin his entry into a top pre-med program. He's focused. School. Homework. Rowi girl's going to mess up his plan. Not even one as intriguing

These two meet in ashes, sparks fly, and their lives light up.

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